The Castle

SUMMARY

That whole summer long we sprawled about leisurely. Every day from the top of the tower we looked at the people mowing hay in the fields. The enemy, half a mile away, didn't seem to pose any danger to us in the slightest.

After all, we thought, we had nothing to be afraid of—not with our loads and loads of weapons and food, our layers upon layers of giant protective walls, and other armies on our side getting closer to us on every green, summer road.

Our gates were secure and our walls were wide, so polished and high that no man could possibly climb them. No cunning scheme could fool us, take us dead or alive. Only a bird was capable of getting in.

What could they lure us with? Our captain was courageous and we were loyal. There was a small, hidden gate, a corrupted pedestrian gate. The shriveled old watchman let them through.

After that our tangle of channeled stone became narrow and fickle as air. Our war was lost without a whimper, the renowned fortress conquered, all its hidden passageways revealed.

How can this disgraceful story be told? I will assert until the day I die that we couldn't do a thing, having been betrayed as such; we were up against bribery, and we had no weapons to fight *that* with.

THEMES

THE DANGERS OF PRIDE

"The Castle" is an allegorical poem about arrogance, idleness, and betrayal. The speaker is a soldier who is overly confident in his army's ability to protect a castle and its inhabitants from their enemies. He has every reason to believe he is on the winning side of the impending war, and never for a second questions the virtue and strength of his own people.

Yet despite having every advantage—a secure fortress, allies, and a courageous captain—the castle falls when its gatekeeper accepts a bribe and lets an enemy army inside. The poem thus illustrates the danger of hubris, which can blind people to their own potential weaknesses.

The poem's speaker is an overly confident soldier who thinks the castle is much too secure for the enemy to stand a chance. The enemy army "seem[s] no threat" compared to the "towering battlements" and "strong [gates]" of the castle, and the soldiers guarding the castle also have "friendly allies" and a "brave" captain.

With seemingly everything in their favor, the castle's soldiers are "at ease" all summer. They've become quite smug about their ability to win the war, and this smugness apparently makes them lazy and idle; thinking no one can beat them, they let down their guard.

Yet just when it seems victory is guaranteed, the speaker reveals the castle has a glaring vulnerability after all: "a little private gate" where a "wizened warder" (that is, an old castle guard) allows the enemy army to pass through in exchange for gold. Despite all its "thick," "smooth," "high" walls and endless stream of provisions, the castle is penetrated—not through force, but through bribery. The castle falls not because it isn't strong or well-protected, then, but because the soldiers are too prideful to consider the possibility that someone in their own ranks might be corruptible—or, perhaps, to consider the power and perspective of anyone outside their ranks at all.

The castle's downfall symbolizes the danger of hubris—that being *too* self-assured and self-centered can actually prevent people from anticipating all the ways they might fail. Pride, it seems, opens the door to disaster.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-30

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

All through that ...
... us at all.

While the speaker of "The Castle" never formally introduces himself, the poem's opening stanza makes it pretty clear that he's a soldier defending a castle against an enemy army. That army doesn't seem to be much of a threat in the speaker's eyes, however, and the poem begins by establishing the calm, leisurely, almost pastoral atmosphere surrounding this mighty castle.

"All through that summer at ease we lay," the speaker says, adding that every day from "the turret wall" (or the little towers at the top of a castle), the soldiers "watched the mowers in the hay" down below. The image of soldiers lounging about watching people mowing in the fields suggests an awfully relaxed (and even complacent) scene considering the enemy army is stationed only "half a mile away."

The word "that," however, hints to readers that this "summer" will be an important one: it's not just any summer, but "that" specific summer when something big happened.

The form and sounds of the poem add to its calm, quiet tone. These lines are written in iambic tetrameter, meaning each line has uses four iambs, metrical feet with an unstressed-stressed rhythm. There are some minor variations here and there, but, for the most part, the meter is steady, as in line 2:

> And dai- | ly from | the tur- | ret wall

The steady ABAAB rhyme scheme also helps to infuse the poem with a sense of predictability and order.

Enjambment also helps to keep this stanza feeling open and relaxed. The lines flow smoothly down the page, evoking the soldiers' complacent comfort.

LINES 6-10

For what, we ...
... leafy summer road.

The speaker explains why the soldiers defending the castle don't think they have anything to fear: they have a seemingly endless supply of "arms" (weapons) and "provender" (food for the animals), not to mention row after row of "battlements" (fortifications in the castle wall from which to shoot at enemies).

The use of diacope in lines 7 and 8 ("load on load" and "tier on tier") suggest the plentiful resources and defenses of the castle's army. They aren't running out of supplies any time soon, and the castle has been built to withstand any kind of attack. What's more, there are "friendly allies drawing near," so it seems the other army really doesn't stand a chance.

The pleasant imagery of "every leafy summer road" adds to the poem's calm, pleasant tone: it's as if the soldiers are just enjoying a lazy summer rather than defending their home against an encroaching enemy.

The gentle sounds of this stanza add to that pleasant tone as well. The soft /w/ alliteration of "what, we thought, had we to fear," and the musical long /ee/ assonance of "friendly," "every," and "leafy," make the speaker sound totally at ease.

LINES 11-15

Our gates were ...
... have got in.

The speaker continues to justify his and his fellow soldiers' total nonchalance about the approaching enemy army. Not only do they have all the supplies and support they could need, but the castle itself is extremely sturdy and well-built.

"Our gates were strong, our walls were thick," the speaker says, the parallelism of this line ("our [x] were [x]") creating a strong, stomping rhythm that emphasizes that strength and thickness. No one could possibly climb the castle's smooth, high walls, the speaker insists, nor could anyone fool the army.

The repetition of "no" in these lines ("no man [...] no clever trick") is an example of anaphora, and, like the parallelism of the line above, this repetition adds emphasis and insistence to the speaker's declaration. It draws attention to how absolutely the soldiers trust the "smooth," "high" walls of the castle to keep them safe. Nothing is getting *through* those walls—"only a bird" flying overhead might stand a chance of getting in.

Notice how the sharp consonance here further evokes the speaker's confidence—or, perhaps, cockiness:

> [...] no clever trick
> Could take us, have us dead or quick.

The meter of these lines is again in strict iambic tetrameter, meaning there are four da-DUMs per line. The first four lines of this stanza also have a caesura right in the middle, as in lines 11-12:

> Our gates were strong, || our walls were thick,
> So smooth and high, || no man could win

The rhythm is thus a steady, assured march. Altogether, it's clear that the speaker's army is completely confident.

And yet, the stanza's final line hints at trouble to come. The speaker says that "only a bird could have" gotten into the castle, and he means this as a kind of boast to show how strong and impenetrable the castle is. And, indeed, this image does suggest that the castle is impenetrable—but only by foot or force. The image of the bird reveals that there are, in fact, other ways to get inside—if one uses other methods than brute strength. Force might not knock down the castle's walls, but perhaps it isn't as invincible as it seems.

LINES 16-20

What could they ...
... let them through.

Stanza 4 begins with a rhetorical question: the speaker asks, "What could they" (meaning the enemy army) "offer us for bait?" The question isn't really meant to be answered; instead, it confidently, maybe even smugly, implies that *no* bait, no bribe or promise, could draw the defending army out of the castle. The speaker explains that the enemy army can't possibly have anything to offer a "brave" captain and a "true" (or loyal) army.

But the ellipsis at the end of those first two lines suggests that the story doesn't end there.

After that ellipsis, the poem's narrative shifts. The speaker acknowledges that despite all the castle's impressive defenses and its parade of supplies and its good, loyal men, it does have a weakness after all: the "little private gate" guarded by a "wizened warder."

Note how the speaker uses diacope (the repetition of "little" in lines 18 and 19) to stress the *smallness* of the "wicket" (or

pedestrian) gate. The soldiers overlooked it because it simply never occurred to them that something so small could result in the crumbling of their entire defense system.

The watchman's "wizened" (or withered) countenance seems also to have escaped the soldiers' scrutiny as well; wars are supposed to be won and lost by big, strong men—by the "brave" and "true" soldiers mentioned right in the previous lines—not by tired old gatekeepers. And yet the soldier's oversight comes at a terrible cost. Together, the overlooked gate and the man who oversees it spell the castle's downfall.

These lines are filled with sonic devices that signal that something important is happening: alliteration ("wicked wicket," "wizened warder"), consonance ("little private gate," "little wicked wicket gate"), and assonance ("little wicked wicket") work together to rev up the poem's intensity.

The speaker further emphasizes the importance of the gate by having the reader land on the word "gate" two lines in a row. This diacope suggests that even a small weakness, when overlooked, can outweigh any number of strengths or advantages.

LINES 21-25

Oh then our ...
... secret galleries bare.

After the other army bribes the watchman to let them through the pedestrian gate, the speaker says that the castle's "maze of tunneled stone / grew thin and treacherous as air." It's as though the very things that had made the castle feel impenetrable—those thick stone walls—are now working *against* the soldiers. In other words, it feels as if the warder's betrayal is being acted out by the castle itself.

The speaker goes on to explain that the battle was "lost without a groan," meaning that once the enemy army found its way inside the castle, there wasn't even a fight. The castle was "overthrown" and its "secret galleries" (or rooms and hallways) were revealed without the soldiers even getting a chance to put up any resistance.

Compared to the lighthearted tone of some of the earlier stanzas in the poem, stanza 5 feels much more somber. This is in part because the reader now knows the outcome of the soldiers' overabundance of confidence; it is also due to the repetition of specific sounds. Soft /n/ consonance ("then," "tunneled," "stone," etc.) and sibilance ("stone," "treacherous," "lost," and so on) create a more hushed, reflective tone as the speaker considers the consequences of the castle's fall. Assonance ("Oh," "stone," "groan," "overthrown") almost evokes the very "groan[s]" the soldiers don't have time to utter.

Four end-stopped lines in a row (lines 22-25, "Grew thin and [...] secret galleries bare.") seem to weigh the stanza down and make it move more slowly, suggesting the emotional toll of losing, and in particular of losing in such a shameful way.

LINES 26-30

How can this ...
... fight it with.

While the first five stanzas of the poem tell the story of the soldiers' misguided confidence and the subsequent fall of the castle, the final stanza is more reflective. The speaker again poses a rhetorical question, this time asking, "How can this shameful tale be told?"

Once again, this question isn't really meant to be answered; in fact, to the speaker, it's unanswerable. He doesn't see any way to explain away the indignity of having lost in such a fashion.

And while he seems to feel regret for the manner in which the castle was overthrown, he doesn't necessarily take any personal responsibility for what happened. In other words, although the poem itself seems to be an allegory about the danger of pride, the speaker blames the fall of the castle only on the greediness of the gatekeeper, who accepted the enemy army's bribe, and on the power of gold itself, against which he argues his army could not fight.

In fact, the speaker's insistence that he will "maintain until [his] death" that he and the other soldiers defending the castle "could do nothing, being sold" feels like a way of avoiding responsibility for the bigger issue—that of the army's excessive pride.

In the end, it wasn't just the warder's greed and the other army's gold that resulted in the castle's downfall; it was the hubris of soldiers who were too smug to even consider the possibility that they might be in some way vulnerable. If they had really taken inventory of the castle's structure and the men who run it rather than laying around, basking in their own superiority, they might have foreseen a problem with the gatekeeper and his gate and thus prevented such a disastrous ending.

But the poem also makes a quite serious point about the futility of strength in the face of corruption and greed. The soldiers might have been complacent—but their complacency wasn't only to do with their pride. It was also to do with their optimism: their belief that everyone in the castle was on the same side, and valued a collective victory over personal gain. The poem suggests that it's much harder to "fight" the greed for "gold" than it is to fight an honest battle.

SYMBOLS

THE GATE

The gate in this poem symbolizes vulnerability or a weak point.

At the beginning of the poem, the speaker describes feeling as if the castle were impenetrable, with "strong," "thick" walls so

"high" nobody could climb them. And yet the castle isn't taken by force: it's taken when the enemy army bribes the watchman to let them through "a little private gate, / A little wicked wicket gate."

This symbolic gate suggests that even the strongest defenses (literal or metaphorical) can have unexpected weaknesses—and that those weaknesses are often in the last place one would think to look.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 18-19:** "There was a little private gate, / A little wicked wicket gate."

POETIC DEVICES

ENJAMBMENT

The poem uses both enjambed and end-stopped lines. In the first few stanzas, the lines are just about evenly split between enjambments and end-stops, creating a natural, balanced pace that evokes the speaker's complacency. The first stanza actually uses three enjambments in a row, signaling the lolling, lazy "ease "with which the soldiers "lay":

> [...] the turret **wall**
> We watched the mowers in the **hay**
> And the enemy half a mile **away**
> They seemed [...]

In the fourth stanza, however, the balance gets thrown off. Just as the speaker mentions the idea of "bait" and the "little private gate" through which the enemy army will pass through, the poem uses end-stopped lines for an entire stanza:

> What could they offer us for **bait?**
> Our captain was brave and we were **true...**
> There was a little private **gate,**
> A little wicked wicket **gate.**
> The wizened warder let them **through.**

The use of five end-stopped lines in a row creates emphasis, and also signals, through the change in rhythm, a significant shift in the poem as the speaker reveals that the castle isn't as impenetrable as he first thought.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "wall / We"
- **Lines 3-4:** "hay / And"
- **Lines 4-5:** "away / They"
- **Lines 6-7:** "fear / With"
- **Lines 9-10:** "near / On"
- **Lines 12-13:** "win / A"
- **Lines 13-14:** "trick / Could"
- **Lines 21-22:** "stone / Grew"
- **Lines 27-28:** "death / We"

DIACOPE

The poem first uses diacope in lines 7 and 8:

> With our arms and provender, **load** on **load**,
> Our towering battlements, **tier** on **tier**,

The repetition of the words "load" and "tier" emphasize just how well supplied and well defended the castle is. The defending army doesn't just have "arms and provender" but "*load on load*" of it. In other words, they have a seemingly endless supply of weapons and fodder for the animals, so they don't have to worry about running out of these wartime essentials. In the same way, the castle doesn't just have "battlements" (parapets on top of a castle wall with openings for archers to shoot through)—it has "*tier on tier*" (or row after row) of these shooting stations.

Having two instances of diacope one after another makes this abundance of supplies and defenses seem even more impressive. It's no wonder the soldiers believe they are unbeatable!

But the poem's next moment of diacope shows just how easy it is to undermine such defenses:

> There was a **little** private **gate,**
> A **little** wicked wicket **gate.**

The speaker's repetitions here underline just how "little" this fateful "gate" was. As it turned out, it didn't take a mighty army to destroy that well-provisioned castle, but just a door, a corrupt doorkeeper, and some gold. The speaker's repetitions here suggest that he just can't get over how easily the castle fell in the end.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "load on load"
- **Line 8:** "tier on tier"
- **Line 18:** "gate"
- **Line 19:** "gate"

PARALLELISM

The poem uses parallelism to create emphasis and drama.

Lines 7-8, for example, feature the parallel statements "our arms and provender, load on load" and "Our towering battlements, tier on tier," both of which end in diacope. The

combination of parallelism and diacope here emphasizes the relationship between the castle's endless supply of weapons and food for the animals and its built-in defenses. It seems the defending army is prepared in every way to win this war.

Similarly, in line 11, the speaker says, "Our gates were strong, our walls were thick." The sturdy rhythm created by this repetition helps to evoke the castle's strength.

In lines 12-14, anaphora emphasizes how foolproof the soldiers believe the castle's defenses to be:

> So smooth and high, no man could win
> A foothold there, no clever trick
> Could take us, have us dead or quick.

The repetition again suggests a kind of endlessness to the castle's preparedness. Nothing, it would seem, is capable of penetrating the castle's walls.

In lines 18-19, however, parallelism is used to different effect. The speaker says,

> There was a little private gate,
> A little wicked wicket gate.

The parallelism here draws attention to what the soldiers *overlooked*. In particular, epistrophe emphasizes the importance of the little pedestrian "gate" which proves to be the castle's downfall. By landing on the word twice in a row, the poem suggests its unforeseen importance.

Finally, the anaphora in lines 23-24, when the speaker describes how the castle fell, suggests how quickly the castle is conquered once the enemy army passes through the pedestrian gate:

> The cause was lost without a groan,
> The famous citadel overthrown,

These similarly-structured lines feel as quick and shocking as the castle's defeat: they land like a one-two punch.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "our "
- **Lines 7-8:** "arms and provender, load on load, / Our towering battlements, tier on tier,"
- **Line 11:** "Our gates were strong, our walls were thick,"
- **Line 12:** "no"
- **Line 13:** "no"
- **Lines 18-19:** "a little private gate, / A little wicked wicket gate."
- **Line 23:** "The"
- **Line 24:** "The"

CONSONANCE

Consonance gives the poem rhythm and music and evokes the speaker's feelings throughout.

For example, listen to the crisp /t/ and /k/ sounds that pepper lines 18-19:

> There was a little private gate,
> A little wicked wicket gate.

The quick, repeated sounds here feel like pinpricks or bee stings—an effect bolstered by the sharp, short /ih/ assonance. All those small, sharp sounds right next to each other suggest both how unimportant-seeming that "wicket gate" was—and how treacherous it ended up being!

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "daily," "wall"
- **Line 3:** "We watched," "mowers"
- **Line 4:** "enemy," "mile"
- **Line 5:** "seemed"
- **Line 6:** "what, we"
- **Line 7:** "arms," "provender"
- **Line 8:** "towering battlements," "tier," "tier"
- **Line 9:** "friendly allies"
- **Line 10:** "leafy"
- **Line 11:** "walls were"
- **Line 12:** "So smooth," "man," "win"
- **Line 13:** "foothold"
- **Lines 13-14:** "clever trick / Could take"
- **Line 14:** "quick"
- **Line 16:** "bait"
- **Line 17:** "brave," "we were," "true"
- **Line 18:** "little private gate"
- **Line 19:** "little wicked wicket gate"
- **Line 20:** "wizened warder"
- **Line 24:** "famous citadel"
- **Line 26:** "tale," "told"
- **Line 27:** "maintain"
- **Line 29:** "only," "gold"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration helps to evoke the poem's mood and setting and draws attention to important moments.

For example, listen to the strong /t/ alliteration in line 8:

> Our towering battlements, tier on tier,

That row of strong /t/ sounds evokes the layers upon layers of impenetrable architecture that make up the castle's defenses. Each of those /t/ sounds sticks up like a "battlement" itself (and note all the /t/ consonance in "battlements," too!)

In lines 16 and 17, meanwhile, /b/ alliteration draws attention to the contrast between the "brave[ry]" of the soldiers and the "bait" (i.e., the bribe) that will spell their doom. As it turns out, the poem will go on to suggest, "bravery" actually doesn't have that many defenses against treachery and bribery!

And listen to the intense /w/ alliteration in these pivotal lines:

> There was a little private gate,
> A little wicked wicket gate.
> The wizened warder let them through.

All those /w/ sounds hit like the sting of a whip—and make a clear connection between the "wizened warder" and the means of his "wicked" betrayal. This alliteration emphasizes that it takes only one traitor and a gate to destroy a whole castle. Strong /t/ consonance and short /ih/ assonance help drive that point home.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "We watched"
- **Line 6:** "what, we"
- **Line 8:** "towering," "tier," "tier"
- **Line 11:** "walls were"
- **Line 12:** "So smooth"
- **Line 13:** "clever"
- **Line 14:** "Could," "quick"
- **Line 16:** "bait"
- **Line 17:** "brave," "we were"
- **Line 19:** "wicked wicket"
- **Line 20:** "wizened warder"
- **Line 21:** "tunneled"
- **Line 22:** "treacherous"
- **Line 24:** "citadel"
- **Line 25:** "secret"
- **Line 26:** "tale," "told"

ASSONANCE

In addition to consonance and alliteration, the poem also uses assonance to create musicality and meaning.

For instance, /ah/ and /ay/ assonance ("All/wall," "lay/daily," etc.) weave throughout the first stanza; the pleasant, open vowel sounds evoke the soldiers' easy complacency as they lie around feeling perfectly safe from their enemies.

In contrast, lines 18-20 contain long /i/ ("private," "wizened") and short /ih/ ("little wicked wicket") assonance. Combined with various other forms of repetition (/t/ consonance, /w/ alliteration, diacope, etc.), this assonance draws attention to the "little wicked wicker gate" that ended up being so terribly important.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "All," "lay"
- **Line 2:** "daily," "wall"
- **Line 3:** "watched," "hay"
- **Line 4:** "away"
- **Line 5:** "all"
- **Line 6:** "we," "we," "fear"
- **Line 8:** "tier," "tier"
- **Line 9:** "friendly," "near"
- **Line 10:** "every," "leafy"
- **Line 13:** "clever"
- **Line 14:** "dead"
- **Line 16:** "bait"
- **Line 17:** "brave"
- **Line 18:** "private"
- **Line 19:** "little," "wicked," "wicket"
- **Line 20:** "wizened"
- **Line 21:** "Oh," "stone"
- **Line 23:** "cause," "lost," "groan"
- **Line 24:** "overthrown"
- **Line 26:** "shameful tale"
- **Line 27:** "maintain"
- **Line 30:** "it," "with"

IMAGERY

Imagery draws the reader into the speaker's world.

When the speaker describes why he and his fellow soldiers felt so at ease, he remembers feeling safe behind "tier on tier" of "towering battlements"—a sweeping image that suggests just how impressive and strong the castle must have felt. Furthermore, the castle's gates are described as "strong" and the walls as "thick," "smooth," and "high." No way is anyone breaching those walls!

Not only that, but "friendly allies" were approaching from "every leafy summer road." This description of the greenness and vitality of summer suggests that the soldiers felt not just safe, but as if they were practically on summer vacation.

In lines 18-22, though, the poem shifts gears as the speaker reveals the castle has a weakness after all. The speaker describes a "wicket" (or pedestrian) "gate" through which the "wizened warder" (or a wrinkled old watchman) allows the enemy army to pass. The image of this shriveled old man might encourage readers to imagine an almost wizard-like figure—an unassuming old guy, as harmless-looking as that "wicked" gate, who ends up being the powerful key to the castle's downfall.

At this point, the castle's "maze of tunneled stone" ceases to be a source of comfort and security; instead, it "gr[ows] thin and treacherous as air." This final image helps to drive home the speaker's final point: no physical defenses can stand up against the forces of corruption.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "Our towering battlements, tier on tier,"
- **Line 10:** "On every leafy summer road."
- **Lines 11-13:** "Our gates were strong, our walls were thick, / So smooth and high, no man could win / A foothold there,"
- **Line 20:** "wizened warder"
- **Lines 21-22:** "Oh then our maze of tunneled stone / Grew thin and treacherous as air."
- **Line 25:** "And all its secret galleries bare."

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The poem poses two rhetorical questions—that is, questions that are asked for dramatic effect rather than to be answered. The first of these comes at the beginning of stanza 4:

> What could they offer us for bait?
> Our captain was brave and we were true...

This rhetorical question ends up being deeply ironic. The speaker has just spent an entire stanza describing the thickness and height of the castle's walls, which he believes unscalable. The question, then, feels boastful—the implied answer is that the enemy army couldn't possibly corrupt the "brave," "true" soldiers. Yet the reader soon finds out that the speaker couldn't have been more wrong. The enemy army in fact "bait[s]" a single watchman with "gold," and he lets them pass through a gate and overtake the castle. The speaker's rhetorical question here thus gestures sadly to his earlier optimism.

There is also a rhetorical question at the beginning of the last stanza. The speaker asks "How can this shameful tale be told?" He goes on to explain that there was simply nothing the soldiers could do in the face of the enemy army's bribe and the warder's greed. It's one thing to fight an enemy army with weapons; but how is one supposed to fight such underhanded dealings? The speaker says they couldn't; they had no "arms" (weapons) that could take on such an enemy. Here, the rhetorical question suggests just how helpless the speaker feels in the face of this unsuspected corruption.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Line 16:** "What could they offer us for bait?"
- **Line 26:** "How can this shameful tale be told?"

VOCABULARY

Turret (Lines 2-3) - A small tower on top of a building or wall, particularly that of a castle.

Mowers (Lines 2-3) - People who cut and harvest grass or hay.

Provender (Lines 6-7) - Animal fodder, such as hay or oats.

Battlements (Line 8) - The guarded walkways at the tops of castles, with openings for shooting arrows or guns through.

Tier (Line 8) - A row or level of a structure.

Dead or quick (Lines 13-14) - Dead or alive.

Wicket gate (Lines 18-19) - A small gate built into a larger door, wall, or fence.

Wizened (Line 20) - Shriveled or wrinkled with age.

Warder (Line 20) - A watchman or a doorkeeper.

Citadel (Line 24) - A fortress which commands and protects a city.

Galleries (Line 25) - Long rooms or passageways.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem is made up of six quintains, or five-line stanzas. Visually, it is tall and thin, perhaps evoking the "turret wall" of a castle, or even the castle itself, its walls unscalable, perched atop a hill.

This simple form keeps the poem's focus on the story at hand: an allegory for the dangers of pride and hubris.

METER

The poem is written in iambic tetrameter, meaning each line has four iambs (metrical feet with an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern). This gives it a (mostly) consistent, bouncy rhythm: da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM. Line 6 is a perfect example:

> For what, | we thought, | had we | to fear

This steady, traditional meter feels calm and easy, reflecting the speaker's carefree attitude.

This makes the contrast between the first half of the poem and the second half all the more startling. The revelation in lines 18-20 about the "wicked wicket gate" that proves to be the castle's downfall is all the more unexpected because of the poem's metrical smoothness; this sudden, dark shift in subject matter happens right in the middle of a stanza, without any major shift in the poem's meter to signal that a major change has just happened. See how steady the meter is in line 18, for instance:

> There was | a lit- | tle pri- | vate gate,

In a way, then, the poem's regular meter reflects how this betrayal happens right under the soldiers' noses. Lines 7-8, meanwhile, play with different metrical feet (while keeping the

strong four-beat pulse of tetrameter):

> With our arms | and pro- | vender, load | on load,
> Our tow- | ering bat- | tlements, tier | on tier,

Not only are these two lines longer than most of the lines around them, but they also feature some anapests, feet that go da-da-DUM—as in "With our arms."

These longer, somewhat clunkier lines evoke the bounty which the speaker is describing. They have "load on load" of food to keep the animals fed; they have "tier on tier" of protective "battlements." And perhaps the rather ungainly rhythm in these lines suggests the way that such bounty allows the soldiers to become complacent, even smug, when they ought to be vigilant.

RHYME SCHEME

Each five-line stanza has the following rhyme scheme:

ABAAB

Overall, the end rhymes are full—they rhyme exactly. This adds to the poem's pleasing, straightforward rhythm and propels the reader along. The poem's rhymes, like its meter, are predictable, in turn evoking the speaker's calm attitude and assurance that all will be well.

This sense of ease then makes it more surprising when the speaker suddenly discovers that his confidence in the castle's defenses is unfounded. In other words, the smooth, steady rhythm lulls the reader into a false sense of complacency that reflects the soldiers' steadfast yet mistaken belief that they can't be conquered.

The poem's final end rhyme ("death" and "with" in lines 27 and 30) is a slant rhyme. After line after line of full rhymes, it stands out. The imperfection of the rhyme seems to suggest the disparity between the speaker's perception of an impenetrable castle and the fact of its downfall.

SPEAKER

The speaker is one of many soldiers guarding a castle. He is more or less a spokesperson, as his thoughts and perceptions appear to represent that of the whole army rather than being individual in nature. In fact, with only one exception, he speaks using communal pronouns: "All through that summer at ease **we** lay," and "For what, **we** thought, had **we** to fear?"

In other words, this isn't just the speaker's own, personal interpretation of what happened; he's recounting the events from a broader perspective. It wasn't just his own pride that led to the downfall of the castle; it was the pride of *an entire army*.

Only in the last stanza does the speaker refer to himself individually, saying in lines 27-28, "I will maintain until my death / We could do nothing, being sold." This line indicates that he is somewhat removed from the events of the poem, and is now looking back on what happened, trying to make sense of it all. He feels regret, knowing the story is a "shameful one." He doesn't necessarily feel a personal responsibility, however, as he places blame squarely on the greedy watchman who let the enemy army through.

It's thus unclear, in the end, if the speaker actually has internalized the poem's lesson about the danger of hubris. He blames solely greed for the castle's downfall, when the castle fell in large part because the soldiers were too busy being prideful to identify its weakness.

SETTING

The poem's setting is, of course, a castle. This castle is protected by soldiers who, growing complacent over the summer, lay about "the turret wall" lazily, unconcerned about "the enemy half a mile away." They can see people mowing hay in the fields below, as well as "load on load" of provisions being brought into the castle.

The castle is well-fortified. It has "towering battlements" and walls that are described as "strong," "thick," and "So smooth and high, no man could win / A foothold" on them. In other words, the castle *should* be impenetrable. There is no way for anyone to scale the walls or break them down.

Yet the presence of "a little private gate, / A little wicked wicket gate" and a "wizened warder" prove to be the castle's downfall. A "wicket gate" is one that pedestrians may pass through; all it takes is bribing the old watchman and the enemy gets through without having to lift a weapon.

Then the "maze of tunneled stone" becomes "thin and treacherous." In other words, the castle becomes a trap the soldiers can't escape. There is no way to defend it from inside. The "famous citadel" is captured, and there's nothing the soldiers can do to keep its "secret galleries" (or hallways) from being revealed.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Edwin Muir (1887-1959) was a highly regarded Scottish writer. He worked as a critic and a journalist for many years before taking up poetry. In the latter half of his life, he became known for his vivid and imaginative poems written in ordinary language. His uncomplicated style bore little resemblance to Modernism, the prevailing literary movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Because Muir operated outside of the literary establishment and the popular modes of his time, he didn't find a quick path to recognition. But eventually, critics and readers alike took notice

of his deft use of myth, folklore, visions, dreams, and religious allusions as well as his simple but evocative style, and his reputation has only grown since his death.

Muir produced his most significant poetry in the 1940s while working for the British Council in Prague and Rome. During this time of working and traveling, he wrote some of his best-received collections, including *The Narrow Place*, *The Voyage, and Other Poems*, and *The Labyrinth*. "The Castle" appeared in *The Voyage* in 1946.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Muir was born in the Orkney Islands, Scotland, in 1887. His family consisted of tenant farmers who moved to Glasgow in 1901, hoping to find better jobs. There they experienced extreme culture shock: the transition from a simple, rural town to a fast-paced, industrialized city was overwhelming, and within five years of moving, both Muir's parents and two of his brothers died.

The grieving Muir never forgot the contrast between his seemingly idyllic childhood in the country and the harsh reality of urban life. He once described the feeling of moving to Glasgow as like time travel, saying, "I was born before the Industrial Revolution [...] When I arrived [in Glasgow] I found that it was not 1751, but 1901, and that a hundred and fifty years had been burned up in my two days' journey. But I myself was still in 1751, and remained there for a long time. All my life since I have been trying to overhaul that invisible leeway."

In its speaker's sudden transition from complacency to the unexpected revelation that the castle has fallen without so much as a "groan," "The Castle" might echo this shock.

On a larger scale, Muir's interest in good and evil and a loss of innocence is a reflection of the times in which he lived. By the time Muir began writing poetry, Europe had already been devastated by World War I, and would soon be mired in World War II. Muir's poetry—including *The Voyage*, the book in which "The Castle" was originally published—grapples seriously with wartime suffering.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Muir and Scotland — Learn about Muir's importance in the Scottish literary world. (https://www.ed.ac.uk/information-services/library-museum-gallery/crc/research-resources/scottish-literature/muir/about)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to the poem read aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qo3c2gT2TAA)
- Muir's Life and Work — Read the Poetry Foundation's short biography of Edwin Muir. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/edwin-muir)
- Muir's Travels — Learn about Muir's travels across Europe and their effect on his writing. (https://blog.oup.com/2017/05/edwin-muir-story-europe/)
- Muir's Legacy — Read a recent appreciation of Muir's poetry. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/may/31/poetry)

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