Mental Cases

POEM TEXT

Who are these? Why sit they here in twilight?
Wherefore rock they, purgatorial shadows,
Drooping tongues from jaws that slob their relish,
Baring teeth that leer like skulls' tongues wicked?
Stroke on stroke of pain,—but what slow panic,
Gouged these chasms round their fretted sockets?
Ever from their hair and through their hand palms
Misery swelters. Surely we have perished
Sleeping, and walk hell; but who these hellish?

—These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished.
Memory fingers in their hair of murders,
Multitudinous murders they once witnessed.
Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander,
Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter.
Always they must see these things and hear them,
Batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles,
Carnage incomparable and human squander
Rucked too thick for these men's extrication.

Therefore still their eyeballs shrink tormented
Back into their brains, because on their sense
Sunlight seems a bloodsmear; night comes blood-black;
Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh
—Thus their heads wear this hilarious, hideous,
Awful falseness of set-smiling corpses.
—Thus their hands are plucking at each other;
Picking at the rope-knouts of their scourging;
Snatching after us who smote them, brother,
Pawing us who dealt them war and madness.

SUMMARY

Who are these men, sitting in the soft light of the setting sun? Why are they rocking back and forth, shadows of their former selves stuck between heaven and hell, their tongues hanging out of their drooling mouths, grimacing menacingly like cursed skulls? Their pain strikes them again and again—but what steady anxiety has caused such intense emptiness and hollowness in their worried eyes? Misery seeps out through their hair and hands. We must have died in our sleep, and are now walking in hell—but who are these citizens of hell?

These are men whose minds have been seized and destroyed by the Dead. Their memories run their fingers through their hair, which is filled with murder—the many murders they once saw. They trudge aimlessly through swamps of flesh, and struggle to stay afloat in pools of blood from lungs that used to be full of laughter. They can never un-see or un-hear these things—the onslaught of guns and the way bodies exploded. The devastating waste of human life they've seen is packed too thickly in their minds for them to escape it.

As such, their tortured eyeballs continue to sink further back into their brains, offended by the way that sunlight looks to them like bloodstains. The night is also dark with blood, and when dawn appears it feels to them like re-opening a wound and causing it to bleed all over again. That's why they have these grotesque expressions, these horrible, fake looks like corpses that have been made to smile. That's why their hands twitch anxiously, picking at their torturous experiences like knots. They grab at us, brother, pitifully reaching for us because we are the ones who sent them to war—and condemned them to madness.

THEMES

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL HORRORS OF WAR

"Mental Cases" is one of Wilfred Owen's most graphic war poems, and was based on his first-hand experience in Scotland's Craiglockhart Military Hospital. The poem is deeply critical of WWI, and argues that many young men's experiences in the conflict will go on to haunt them. These men—the "mental cases" of the poem's title—are so troubled by what they've been through that they've essentially become the living dead. The poem argues that the effects of war stretch far beyond the battlefield, and it condemns those who bear responsibility for this suffering and dehumanization. No cause, the poem implies, justifies the "carnage" and "madness" of modern conflict.

The speaker describes the conditions inside a war hospital in gruesome detail in order to establish the horrific physical and mental consequences of war—particularly a war as deadly as WWI. The hospital is presented as a kind of "hell," the soldiers there so far removed from being their former selves that they don't even seem fully human.

This idea reflected by the poem's focus on their individual body parts. The speaker never identifies another soldier by name, instead focusing on "tongues," "jaws," "hair," "palms," "eyeballs," and so on. This dehumanization of the men speaks to the way that war itself has stripped them of their humanity. The focus

on body parts also creates a shockingly horrific atmosphere, gesturing towards the gruesome injuries and deaths that were a daily fact of warfare.

But these men are not just in the hospital for bodily injuries; these are the "mental cases" who are suffering the ongoing *psychological* torture inflicted on them by their wartime experiences. Though they have technically escaped the battlefield, their trauma lives within them like a parasite. And this *inner* war—the war that never ceases—is so overwhelming that the men can no longer properly function in the world.

Instead, they sit there drooling, their eyes staring off into the distance, their hands twitching in spasms. The speaker attributes this to the way their minds have been "ravished" by "the Dead" (the word capitalized to represent them as a great, zombie-like horde). The poem implies that living after the war is perhaps a *worse* fate than dying during it, because the after-effects are so harrowing.

For these men, then, life will never return to normal. When dawn breaks and brings a new day, it brings for them only purgatory—the ongoing pain of psychological suffering. And in its conclusion, the poem turns to the reader—"brother"—and suggests that it was "us" who dealt the men "war and madness." This might refer to the collective failure of humanity that leads to war, or more specifically the initial enthusiasm for the war in Britain that led so many young men to sign up, expecting more of an adventurous holiday than either death or lifetime of psychological torture.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-28

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

Who are these? Why sit they here in twilight?
Wherefore rock they, purgatorial shadows,
Drooping tongues from jaws that slob their relish,
Baring teeth that leer like skulls' tongues wicked?
Stroke on stroke of pain,

The poem opens in what's implied to be a military hospital, and focuses on men suffering from shell-shock (which is now referred to as post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD). The poem starts with a series of rhetorical questions that ask the reader to consider both who these men are and why they sit "in twilight." The speaker asks why ("wherefore") these men have been reduced to "shadows" of their former selves, and now spend their days in pain, rocking back and forth and drooling from their open mouths. The grotesque imagery here gives the reader a shockingly vivid sense of the scene inside the hospital.

As *literal* questions, the answers are obvious: these are men trying to recover from shocking war experiences, and they are in the hospital as part of their convalescence. But these questions also gesture towards the fact that—as the rest of the poem makes clear—these men no longer seem human; language about "shadows" makes it seem as though it's they have become the suffering ghosts of their former selves. These questions thus speak more widely to the sense of the war as an incredible, unjustifiable waste of human life. That is, the speaker isn't really asking the immediate why they're sitting there in the military hospital, but why the *war* that led them there happened in the first place.

Diving into more specifics of those questions, the mention of "purgatorial shadows" is likely an allusion to Dante's *Inferno*. There, and elsewhere in literature, the souls of the dead are known as "shades," the implication being that they are no longer physically present in the world, and instead are mere shadows—like the negative of a photograph—cast by their former waking lives.

What's interesting here is how the speaker conflates this with purgatory, which is an in-between place that is neither heaven nor hell. The idea is that, though the men are almost as good as dead in the sense that they can no longer function, the fact that they *are* still alive constitutes a kind of ongoing, undecided state. That is, they are caught between the poles of the living and the dead, not quite one or the other. Indeed, the poem subtly implies that either option—being fully alive or being fully dead—would be better than being *barely* alive.

Notice how the language here actually *sounds* gruesome too—it's intentionally graphic, designed to shock the reader into empathizing with the wounded soldiers. The assonant /aw/ of "jaws that slob" evokes that loose-mouthed slobber, for example. The consonant /k/ and sharp /t/ sounds then make the lines sound almost like they're being spat out (the /s/ sound adds to this effect):

> Wherefore rock they, purgatorial shadows,
> Drooping tongues from jaws that slob their relish,
> Baring teeth that leer like skulls' tongues wicked?
> Stroke on stroke of pain, [...]

The diacope of "Stroke on stroke" underscores the intensity of the soldiers' pain, playing on the way that "stroke" usually relates to something gentle. The men's pain is constant and real, but it's also a kind of phantom, something without physicality. "Stroke" can also refer to time, as in the "stroke of the clock." Immediately, then, the reader is given a powerful impression of ongoing, day-to-day, minute-to-minute torture.

LINES 5-9

—but what slow panic,
Gouged these chasms round their fretted sockets?

Ever from their hair and through their hand palms
Misery swelters. Surely we have perished
Sleeping, and walk hell; but who these hellish?

The caesura after "pain" in line 5 divides the stanza in half. And though the poem suggests a change of direction with "but," really the intention is the same—more pain, more misery, and more shocking descriptive language. Indeed, "panic" chimes powerfully with "pain" to indicate that there is no real rest, no real caesura (break) in the mental anguish of these men.

In the next rhetorical question, the poem uses an oxymoron—"slow panic"—to ask how the men got these terrifying (and terrified), hollowed-out looks on their faces. If the eyes are the windows of the soul, these men have metaphorical "chasms" where their souls should be—they've had their souls stolen by their experiences in war.

In the one sentence that *isn't* a question in the first stanza, the speaker states that "misery swelters" from their hair and palms. Notice how in line 7 to 8 enjambment suggests a state of ongoing pain, and how the sibilance (of /s/ and /z/ sounds) suggests the soldiers' anguished perspiration:

> Ever from their hair and through their hand palms
> Misery swelters. [...]

The closeness of other sounds—as well as the assonance and /r/ consonance here—keeps the tone close to that of an incantation or spell. It's as though the speaker is trying to conjure the men's pain in the reader's mind, and the way that sounds are packed into every inch of the poem provide a relentless onslaught that approximates what the men experienced on the battlefield.

After "swelters," the speaker uses the pronoun "we" to indicate the there are many people at the hospital, and also to draw the reader deeper into the experience being described. The speaker argues that "we" must have died, and now walk through "hell."

Through polyptoton, the speaker then asks a final rhetorical question—"who these hellish?" Indeed, it's the same question as the one right at the beginning—only now the speaker intends to focus his gaze on the shell-shocked men and give the reader a full, unflinching account of what they have become.

LINES 10-14

—These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished.
Memory fingers in their hair of murders,
Multitudinous murders they once witnessed.
Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander,
Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter.

The speaker attempts to answer the main questioned posed in the first: who are these "hellish" men? These men, the speaker tells the reader, are those "whose minds the Dead have ravished." In other words, these soldiers are continually haunted by the dead, perhaps because what they saw in war was so terrible, or because they feel guilty for having survived when so many others didn't.

"Ravished" here primarily means seized and carried away—meaning the men in the hospital are no longer all that present mentally (which is why they are "mental cases")—but has an interesting secondary meaning too. The word can also mean to rape, and the intense and grotesque sensuousness of what follows does have a weird and unsettling focus on the body. (Paradoxically, "to ravish" can also mean to fill with delight.) There is something very deadened about the /d/ consonance in "minds," "dead," and "ravished" that captures this state of paralyzing anguish.

Lines 11 to 14 then use complex metaphorical imagery that conjures an atmosphere of psychological torture. "Memory," like some perverted demon, rungs its metaphorical fingers through the soldiers' "hair of murders." Though the soldiers were ostensibly ordered to kill enemy combatants, they view this now as having committed murder.

Meanwhile, the /m/ sounds in "memory," "multitudinous," and "murders" (itself repeated twice in quick succession through diacope) suggests the abundance of these experiences. The men's minds are *full* of acts of killing—acts they performed themselves, and those they witnessed.

In lines 13 to 14, the poem subverts a quintessential part of the WWI combat experience. These surviving soldiers fought in trenches, and would have come up against extremely muddy conditions. Mud might sound like a pretty minor problem compared to artillery and machine-gun fire, but it was a major factor in the soldiers' wartime misery. Wading through it—living in it—was exhausting and dangerous.

Now, though, the men are "[w]ading" through "sloughs of flesh" and "[t]reading" through blood. To tread can mean to walk through but also to swim in place, as in treading water; this secondary meaning adds yet more horror to the image at hand. Such is the intensity of their memories that they are now stuck in metaphorical swamps of death, unable to escape the visceral horror of seeing limbs torn apart and men with gaping holes in their bodies. They are also "helpless" as they "wander," adding to the sense of fear and futility.

The sound of line 13 captures the idea that the men now trudge not through trenches, but their own minds and horrific memories:

> Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander,

Notice how the trochaic rhythm has a march-like motion, while the consonant /l/ and /s/ sounds somehow manages to conjure the image of flesh falling off the bone. In their minds, the men are till at war, still advancing, never to reach the target.

Line 14 employs a similar idea to line 13. The men "tread[] blood from lungs that had loved laughter." The alliteration here evokes the sound both of chuckling and of choking. The image is tragic, emphasizing how delicate the human body is and how quickly war sucks the "laughter" out of those "lungs."

LINES 15-18

Always they must see these things and hear them,
Batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles,
Carnage incomparable and human squander
Rucked too thick for these men's extrication.

In line 15, the speaker states that what prevents the men from recovering is that they must "always" see and hear "these things"—that is, they constantly relive the horrible sights and sounds of war in their minds. Line 16 adds two more experiences to this list of "things":

> Batter of guns and shatter of flying muscles,

Once again, it's notable how the poem rarely refers to human beings in their bodily entirety. Instead, it constantly focuses on *parts*, this time the "shatter of flying muscles"—the horrific destruction of muscles hit by gunfire. The sheer violence presented throughout the poem is intentionally shocking, and the presentation of the body in disconnected parts helps convey the way that the men's minds too have been torn apart. Here, that violence is conveyed by the loud internal rhyme of "batter" with "shatter."

Lines 17 and 18 are different from the rest of the stanza. Here, the speaker admits the limitations of language and logic—how the nothing can really capture the "carnage incomparable" of war, and how the men's minds will never regain freedom ("extrication") from their experiences.

That said, the poem doesn't let up on its content barrage of forceful sound patterning:

> Carnage incomparable and human squander
> Rucked too thick for these men's extrication.

Throughout the poem, consonant hard /c/ and /k/ sounds rain down like artillery fire. Line 18's "rucked too thick" is a metaphor for the way in which numerous and terrible war experiences are packed together in the soldier's minds. Though these men have escaped physically, they haven't found—and most likely won't find—found mental freedom or peace.

LINES 19-22

Therefore still their eyeballs shrink tormented
Back into their brains, because on their sense
Sunlight seems a bloodsmear; night comes blood-black;
Dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh

Having argued that the men in the hospital have minds "ravished" by the "Dead," the speaker now states that it is logical—obvious, even—that their misery is apparently without end. This section of the poem focuses on the way that this psychological turmoil affects the men in every waking hour of every day. Indeed, the men seem afraid of "sunlight" because it reminds them of a "bloodsmear." For the "mental cases," the red hues of the dawn sky are not beautiful, but a frightening reminder of bloody wounds. These lines maintain the poem's intense use of alliteration, assonance, and consonance:

> Therefore still their eyeballs shrink tormented
> Back into their brains, because on their sense
> Sunlight seems a bloodsmear;

Plosive /b/ sounds suggest carnage through their harshness, while the /s/ and /z/ sounds adds a sinister hush to the description.

Being awake during the day is torturous for the hospitalized men—but night offers no respite either; it, too, is filled with blood. A caesura in line 21 divides "sunlight" from "night," but the rest in the line is short-lived, showing that the men themselves are never really at rest. Night "comes blood-black," and, like sunlight, is reminiscent of a wound. The alliteration of the phrase is thick and heavy.

In line 22, dawn returns, compared through simile to "a wound that bleeds afresh." Each man's mental state, then, is like a wound that will never heal. This speaks to the ongoing effects of the war, and casts doubt on whether these men will ever recover any semblance of normal life.

LINES 23-28

—Thus their heads wear this hilarious, hideous,
Awful falseness of set-smiling corpses.
—Thus their hands are plucking at each other;
Picking at the rope-knouts of their scourging;
Snatching after us who smote them, brother,
Pawing us who dealt them war and madness.

The speaker ends the poem with two sentences that begin with "Thus their" (an example of anaphora). The phrase suggests the closing remarks of an argument—which makes sense given that the first stanza asked questions and the second presented evidence. Now, the last stanza makes clear the ongoing consequences that the men in the hospital must suffer.

As with earlier in the poem, the speaker talks in a way that dehumanizes the men. This dehumanization is not because the speaker doesn't respect them, but because the poem seeks to show how *the war* has taken away their humanity. The speaker presents them as the living dead, like corpses with grotesque and misplaced smiles stretched across their faces. Alliteration between "heads," "hilarious," hideous," creates three prominent /h/ sounds drawing attention to the disturbing imagery of grotesque, laughing heads. The image is purposefully

paradoxical, evoking the way a lifeless corpse's face may be set in a "smiling" position that is totally at odds with the reality at hand. The soldiers' faces seem frozen, as in death, yet they are still alive.

The second sentence focuses on the men's hands, which reflect their inner turmoil, twitching as though attempting to untie imaginary knots. The poem here mentions "rope-knouts," which also refers to a leather whip used for torture (a.k.a, "scourging"). Not coincidentally, this section makes use of a sound found throughout the poem—the hard /c/ or /k/. "Plucking" and "picking," which also alliterate harshly, have an almost onomatopoeic effect, as though these sounds themselves are knots in the line.

Lines 27-28 mark a subtle but important change in direction. Here, the speaker addresses a "brother" through apostrophe. This, of course, is not an actual brother, but a reference to the wider readership of the poem (particularly early 20th-century readers). The men "snatch" after those "who smote them"—those who attacked them and/or defeated them.

Yet "them" does not refer to the actual enemy during the war (the Central Powers, e.g. Germany, Austria-Hungary) but to those on the *same side* as the men in the hospital. The speaker feels that it is "us"—society more widely—that "dealt [the men] war and madness." In other words, the speaker condemns the reader and society for their part in the war, whether a product of patriotism, ignorance, or mere indifference.

The soldiers can only "paw" at those responsible for their torment, however, lacking the strength to be more aggressive or assertive in their condemnation. Taken on a broader level, this suggests the soldiers' inability to hold any higher office—any government or official—to account for their current state.

SYMBOLS

EYES

Part of the power of "Mental Cases" is the way that it focuses on individual body parts rather than people as a whole. This has a dehumanizing effect that, in turn, gestures toward the way that war strips soldiers of their humanity.

The poem often focuses on the soldiers' eyes in particular, which become symbolic of the men's lost humanity and individual identities. Think about the old cliché that the eyes are the window to the soul—that people can be known most intimately through their eyes. These men, however, have "chasms" in their "fretted [eye]sockets," deep (metaphorical) holes where their eyes used to be.

The implication is that they *have no* souls; they are but shadows of their formers selves, not fully alive yet not dead. Their "shrink[ing]" eyeballs reveal that they are disconnected from normal life, sinking further and further in a nightmarish world of memories. Eyes, then, also symbolize how their owners are, in a way, not there—they aren't fully present in the real world because they are unable to stop seeing what their eyes saw on the battlefield.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "chasms round their fretted sockets"
- **Lines 19-21:** "their eyeballs shrink tormented / Back into their brains, because on their sense / Sunlight seems a bloodsmear"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

The poem uses alliteration throughout. Alliteration helps to intensify the horror of the poem, with the relentlessness of the poem's sounds bombarding the reader much like the men's traumatic memories bombard them in the hospital. By essentially turning up the volume on the poem, alliteration also makes the grotesque images at hand stand out all the more starkly.

Lines 4 and 5, for example, use alliteration of sharp /t/, hissing /s/, and plosive /p/ sounds:

> Baring teeth that leer like skulls' tongues wicked?
> Stroke on stroke of pain,—but what slow panic,

These sounds lend the lines a popping, sickly feel (especially when also taking into account the hard /k/ consonance throughout). The sounds here help capture the poem's shocking portrayal of violence and psychological torture. It's almost as though the sounds here are attacking the reader!

In the second stanza, /m/ alliteration occurs throughout the first three lines:

> —These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished.
> Memory fingers in their hair of murders,
> Multitudinous murders they once witnessed.

These lines, not coincidentally, are about all the "murders" that replay in the men's minds. The alliteration itself—all those /m/ sounds—reflects that abundance. In the same stanza (line 14), "lungs" and "loved laughter" alliterate, connecting the men's joy to their delicate physical bodies—to those blood-leaking lungs.

In lines 20 and 21 of the final stanza, /b/ and /s/ sounds once again create an aural barrage on the listener:

Back into their brains, because on their sense
Sunlight seems a bloodsmear; night comes
blood-black;

As best it can, the poem tries to bombard the reader with sound in a way that gestures towards the sensory onslaught experienced by the soldiers. The /b/ sound continues in the next line, while three /h/ sounds in line 23 evoke the sound of cackling laughter—"heads," "hilarious," and "hideous" create a kind of "ha-ha-ha." In lines 25 to 27, "plucking" alliterates with "picking," while the /s/ of "scourging" echoes in "snatching" and "smote." Again, the poem creates a mixture of abrasive and threatening sounds to evoke its atmosphere of torment and horror.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "tongues"
- **Line 4:** "teeth," "skulls," "tongues"
- **Line 5:** "Stroke," "stroke," "pain," "slow," "panic"
- **Line 6:** "sockets"
- **Line 7:** "hair," "hand," "palms"
- **Line 8:** "perished"
- **Line 9:** "hell," "hellish"
- **Line 10:** "men," "minds"
- **Line 11:** "Memory," "murders"
- **Line 12:** "Multitudinous murders," "once ," "witnessed"
- **Line 13:** "Wading," "wander"
- **Line 14:** "lungs," "loved laughter"
- **Line 20:** "Back," "brains," "because," "sense"
- **Line 21:** "Sunlight seems," "bloodsmear," "blood-black"
- **Line 22:** "breaks," "bleeds"
- **Line 23:** "heads," "hilarious, hideous"
- **Line 24:** "set-smiling"
- **Line 25:** "plucking"
- **Line 26:** "Picking," "scourging"
- **Line 27:** "Snatching," "s," "mote"

ALLUSION

There are no *obvious* allusions in "Mental Cases," but there are some possible examples worth considering.

The first allusion is when the speaker compares the soldiers in the hospital to "purgatorial shadows" in line 2. In some Christian (primarily Catholic) theology, purgatory is a place in the afterlife that exists somewhere between heaven and hell. This relates to how the men are caught in a kind of terrible in-between—they are not dead, but they're not fully alive either (because they are so haunted by their war experiences).

The mention of "shadows" possibly alludes specifically to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which also relates to the afterlife. In the *Divine Comedy*, many people become "shades" when they die. This is part of the way that the poem dehumanizes the soldiers, marking them out as a kind of living dead.

Though the poem isn't set directly in the heat of battle, it does allude to some typical experiences that the men would have gone through during WWI. In lines 13 and 14, for example, the poem refers specifically to trench warfare, which was how much of WWI was fought. Firing at the enemy from man-made ditches, soldiers had to endure horrible conditions in addition to incoming artillery and machine-gun fire. Terrible weather made these trenches into pits of death and disease, and what's striking about the idea of "wading sloughs of flesh" and "treading blood from lungs" is that neither description is particularly far-fetched; the trenches really *were* full of the injured and deceased.

The poem's last two lines also allude to wider attitudes towards the war. In particular, these lines refer to those people who encouraged young men to sign up and fight. This poem contains nothing of the naive patriotism of poets like Rupert Brooke or Jessie Pope, instead asking anyone reading—including those who had no direct role in the war—to consider their own hand in "deal[ing] [the men] war and madness."

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "purgatorial shadows"
- **Lines 13-14:** "Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander, / Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter."
- **Lines 27-28:** "Snatching after us who smote them, brother, / Pawing us who dealt them war and madness."

APOSTROPHE

"Mental Cases" has one clear example of apostrophe in line 27:

Snatching after us who smote them, brother,
Pawing us who dealt them war and madness.

This apostrophe creates a divide between two sets of people—those who are in the hospital, and those who bear responsibility for putting them there. The speaker, it seems, occupies both camps, and attempts to get the addressee—the reader and/or society—to see their part in dealing "war and madness."

The use of "brother" is a familiar term, marking this out as an unsettling and intimate moment. It's as though the speaker wants *everyone* who reads the poem to see that, as a small part of the human family, they bear some responsibility. This, of course, would have felt quite confrontational for readers in the early 20th century—those who were alive during the war, and perhaps supported it. But it also reverberates in the 21st century, asking people to try to understand the horrors of WWI in order that they might not be repeated.

It's worth noting that the first stanza *could* be considered apostrophe as well because of its use of rhetorical questions

and the pronoun "we." It's not clear exactly who the poem is addressed too—it could be the reader, the British, humanity more generally, or all of these—but it is clear that the speaker feels the plight of the "mental cases" (hospitalized men) to be tragic and requiring attention.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 27:** "brother"

ASSONANCE

Assonance occurs throughout "Mental Cases." This is a poem that intentionally bombards the reader from start to finish, and assonance (like alliteration and consonance) makes the lines feel all the more intense and relentless.

For example, in lines 3 and 4, assonant vowels build a sense of grotesque horror, bringing the visceral description of the men's mouths to life:

> Drooping tongues from jaws that slob their relish,
> Baring teeth that leer like skulls' tongues wicked?

The /aw/ sounds in "jaws that slob" is particularly striking, as the movement required to actually create this sound aloud actually makes the jaw open and go slack—which is exactly what's being described. Notice, too, how the /ee/ sounds of "teeth" and "'leer" make the reader's mouth stretch as if to mimic the men's nervous tension.

In line 5, round, long /o/ sounds then slow the poem down—evoking the "slow panic" being described:

> Stroke on stroke of pain,—but what slow panic,

Similarly open vowels repeat in "Gouged" and "round," once again enhancing the poem's imagery through sound; the speaker is saying that the men's eyes are totally empty, metaphorically speaking, and the /ow/ assonance requires a mouth openness that reflects the hollowness being described.

The second stanza contains assonance as well. Take the short /uh/ of "blood," "lungs," and "love," which connects the soldiers' bodily destruction to an emotional loss, and also pushes readers to linger on the horror being described. Later in the stanza, the internal rhyme of "batter" and "shatter" (created through both assonance and consonance) again draws readers' attention to the imagery at hand, connecting the relentlessness of machine gun fire to total bodily destruction.

Finally, assonance in the third stanza heightens the poem's surreal grotesqueness. Lines 19 to 21, with their repetition of short /ih/ and long /ee/ sounds combined with sibilance, feel like some sickening and sickly potion recipe, while the repetitiveness of "hilarious, hideous," "falseness," and "set-smiling corpses" ensures there's no let-up for the reader—just as there is no let-up for the soldiers themselves.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "tongues from," "jaws," "slob"
- **Line 4:** "teeth," "l," "eer," "skulls' tongues"
- **Line 5:** "Stroke," "stroke," "slow"
- **Line 6:** "Gouged," "round"
- **Line 7:** "their hair," "their"
- **Line 10:** "have ravished"
- **Line 11:** "fingers in," "their hair"
- **Line 13:** "flesh," "helpless"
- **Line 14:** "blood," "lungs," "loved"
- **Line 15:** "see these"
- **Line 16:** "Batter of," "shatter of"
- **Line 19:** "still," "shrink"
- **Line 20:** "into"
- **Line 21:** "seems," "bloodsmear," "comes blood"
- **Line 23:** "this hilarious, hideou," "s"
- **Line 24:** "falseness," "set"
- **Line 28:** "dealt them"

CAESURA

Caesurae occur throughout "Mental Cases." Generally speaking, they allow the poem to pause at dramatic moments, creating tension between its onward trochaic march (more on this in "Meter") and brief moments of rest. The rests never feel comfortable, however, which helps capture the relentless psychological pain felt by the men on a daily basis.

The pauses start right away. In the first line, an abrupt question mark after "these" forces the reader to stop for a moment and consider the question at hand; the speaker doesn't say "these men" or "they," but already subtly dehumanizes the soldiers with the rather dismissive "these."

Another caesura appears in the second line, as the speaker describes how the men "rock" in their chairs:

> Wherefore rock they, purgatorial shadows,

Read this out loud and note how the caesura creates a pendulum-like feeling in the line. In this way, the poem performs a similar motion to the men in their chairs.

Next, line 5 uses caesura to create a brief and unsettling pause:

> Stroke on stroke of pain,—but what slow panic,

This caesura supports the oxymoronic "slow panic," which relates to the way the men are both restless and still at the same time. In their minds they are panicking, but they're not going anywhere in reality. The caesurae in lines 8 and 9 achieve something similar; the repetitiveness of "[s]troke on stroke" evokes panic, which is then undercut—slowed down—by a

caesura.

It's worth noting that there aren't any caesurae in the second stanza. Perhaps that's because this is the stanza that deals more directly with the men's war experiences. Those experiences, of course, were horrible and prolonged—and the lack of caesura perhaps signals the lack of rest for those fighting in war; the horrors instead flow into one another without end.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "?"
- **Line 2:** ","
- **Line 5:** ",—"
- **Line 8:** "."
- **Line 9:** ";"
- **Line 20:** ","
- **Line 21:** ";"
- **Line 23:** ","
- **Line 27:** ","

CONSONANCE

Consonance is a key part of "Mental Cases." In fact, there's hardly a syllable in the poem that *doesn't* connect with another nearby through shared sound. But rather than create something lyrical or pleasant, this relentless consonance has an intentionally tiring and unsettling effect on the reader. The poem offers no moments of respite, instead creating a sonic onslaught that gestures towards—though of course can't fully capture—both the sensory overload of war and the ongoing psychological torture affecting the men in the hospital.

In the first stanza, a mixture of sharp /t/, /p/, and /k/ sounds mix with sibilant /s/ and /z/ sounds to create a genuinely sinister, unsettling atmosphere:

> Drooping tongues from jaws that slob their relish,
> Baring teeth that leer like skulls' tongues wicked?
> Stroke on stroke of pain,—but what slow panic,
> Gouged these chasms round their fretted sockets?

The mixture of sounds here is intentional harsh and violent, relentless in its repetition.

Another key moment of consonance comes in the first three lines of the second stanza:

> —These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished.
> Memory fingers in their hair of murders,
> Multitudinous murders they once witnessed.

This section is full /z/ and humming /m/ sounds, which create a steady, unsettling buzz beneath the words. Meanwhile, the dull, heavy consonance of /d/ sounds has a deadening effect (suggesting the soldiers' "ravished" minds), growling /r/ sounds suggests an undercurrent of anger, and, finally, the many /s/ sounds add a whispery hiss that suggests psychological torture.

Later in the stanza, the poem returns to the hard /k/ sound with "carnage," "rucked," "thick," and "extrication." The speaker describes how the men's horrible memories are packed overwhelmingly tight in their minds, and this harsh sound sticks out as though it too wants to be separated out from the mass of other sounds.

Lines 19 to 24 in the final stanza rely heavily on /s/ and /b/ sounds. Here, the /s/ sound conveys similar ideas to those noted above, but also brings the image of "bloodsmear" to life—the sound itself is spread throughout the lines. Alongside the /s/, loud /b/ sounds in words like "eyeballs" and "blood-black" have a relentless intensity, not allowing the poem—or the reader—a moment's rest. This, of course, the continuous "slow panic" that has become the men's daily lives.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Line 3
- Line 4
- Line 5
- Line 6
- Line 7
- Line 8
- Line 9
- Line 10
- Line 11
- Line 12
- Line 13
- Line 14
- Line 15
- Line 16
- Line 17
- Line 18
- Line 19
- Line 20
- Line 21
- Line 22
- Line 23
- Line 24
- Line 25
- Line 26
- Line 27
- Line 28

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is a relatively rare feature in "Mental Cases," which instead usually relies on end-stopped lines to create a

weighty, plodding atmosphere. When enjambment does appear, then, it's striking for the reader.

There are two enjambments in the first stanza, occurring between lines 7 and 9:

> Ever from their hair and through their hand palms
> Misery swelters. Surely we have perished
> Sleeping, and walk hell; but who these hellish?

The speaker gives the reader a harrowing portrait of the men's restlessness. These men are so traumatized by their war experiences that they are constantly anxious. The two enjambments capture this restless psychological state, briefly increasing the poem's momentum by forgoing any pauses at the line breaks. The brief blank space after "perished" further suggests absence and nothingness, subtly highlighting how these men weren't granted the luxury of death.

In the second stanza, lines 17 is enjambed. This adds powerful weight to the word "[r]ucked," which describes how horrific memories crowd the minds of the men in the hospital. The lack of pause at the end of the line evokes that "thick" crowding.

Finally, in the third stanza, the first two lines are enjambed:

> Therefore still their eyeballs shrink tormented
> Back into their brains, because on their sense
> Sunlight seems a bloodsmear; night comes blood-
> black;

The enjambment here supports the image of the men's eyeballs shrinking "back into their brains," terrified by the way that sunlight reminds them—in the logic of the nightmarish psychological state—of bloodstains. The lack of pause at the end of the line, combined with the harsh /b/ and /k/ sounds of "[b]ack," feels intentionally violent and abrupt, suggesting the way the men recoil from the bright light of the outside world.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "palms / Misery"
- **Lines 8-9:** "perished / Sleeping"
- **Lines 17-18:** "squander / Rucked"
- **Lines 19-20:** "tormented / Back"
- **Lines 20-21:** "sense / Sunlight"

METAPHOR

Metaphor is an important part of "Mental Cases." The poem is generally full of figurative language because the men themselves are stuck in a kind of terrible fantasy. Such was the terror of their real-life experiences, they can no longer escape them mentally—even if they escaped them physically. Metaphor and simile help to make reality itself feel unstable, and to make the men's nightmares all the more real.

The first metaphor occurs in line 2, when the speaker describes the men as "purgatorial shadows." This phrase presents the men as mere ghosts of their former selves, stuck in an in-between place; they are neither fully alive nor fully deceased.

Later, in line 6, their eyes are described as "chasms"—implying a total emptiness. If eyes are the windows of the soul, these men have had their souls hollowed out by their horrific war experiences—leaving vast, gaping holes where their eyes should be, metaphorically speaking. Also in this stanza, misery is presented as a kind of sweat that seeps from every pore ("Misery swelters" in line 8).

In the second stanza, the speaker expands on the mental state of these men. Through metaphorical personification, the speaker states that:

> Memory fingers in their hair of murders,

Combined with the mention of "ravished" in the previous line, there is something sinisterly seductive about the idea of memory running its fingers through the men's hair—like the tender touch of a lover. This is in fact a double metaphor, because the hair itself is described as a "hair of murders." Each man's wartime experiences is tangled up his daily psychological state, represented by the focus on the head through "hair."

In the same stanza, the men are described as "wading" and "wander[ing]" through "flesh" and "treading blood." Both of these capture the horror of the poem—the men are inert and inactive, but in their minds they face the relentless torture of nightmares and relived experiences. Their memories lie before them like impossible obstacles—swamps of flesh, seas of blood.

In the last stanza, the men "pick[] at the rope-knouts of their scourging." Here, the poem seems to play with "knouts" as "knots" and as a type of torture device similar to a whip. The men's psychological suffering is metaphorically transformed into physical punishment—while the fact that they are trying to untie these "rope-knouts" suggests their memories are something they will never fully make sense of.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "purgatorial shadows"
- **Lines 5-6:** "but what slow panic, / Gouged these chasms round their fretted sockets?"
- **Lines 7-8:** "Ever from their hair and through their hand palms / Misery swelters."
- **Line 10:** "—These are men whose minds the Dead have ravished."
- **Line 11:** "Memory fingers in their hair of murders"
- **Lines 13-14:** "Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander, / Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter"
- **Line 26:** "Picking at the rope-knouts of their scourging"

OXYMORON

There are arguably two oxymorons in "Mental Cases" in line 5, which describes how the men feel:

> Stroke on stroke of pain,—but what slow panic,

Both of these phrases refer to the psychological turmoil of the men in the hospital. They experience "stroke" after "stroke of pain." Stroking, of course, is usually gentle and affectionate. There's something grotesque and harrowing, then, about strokes of pain. That said, stroke can also refer to the passage of time—as in the stroke of the clock. Thus, it's up to interpretation whether this is *truly* oxymoronic or not; regardless, the effect is unsettling.

The other phrase here, "slow panic," is undoubtedly oxymoronic. Panic is a state of heightened anxiety defined by rushing around in a hurry—the way people run away from some kind of threat. But the men's panic is "slow," capturing how they are at once inactive *and* overactive. Their bodies move little (in terms of where they sit, though they do twitch frequently), but their minds are constantly under siege from their memories.

Where Oxymoron appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Stroke on stroke of pain,—but what ," "slow panic,"

REPETITION

There are a few types of repetition at work in "Mental Cases." he first of these is diacope, found in line 5's "[s]troke on stroke of pain." Here, the speaker describes the ongoing psychological state of the men in the hospital. They are in constant pain, with the repetition of "stroke" indicating that this pain keeps returning—or, indeed, never goes away.

Later in the same stanza (lines 8 and 9), the speaker uses polyptoton:

> [...] Surely we have perished
> Sleeping, and walk hell; but who these hellish?

Essentially, the speaker is describing the hospital as a kind of hell. That's because the men seem to in such pain it's as if they are being tortured by demons. The men are "hellish" because they are the inhabitants of this living hell—they are citizens who have to traverse a world of pain on a daily basis. Two "hell" words make this *doubly* frightening.

In the second stanza, diacope appears again with: "murders, / Multitudinous murders." The speaker uses repetition here to emphasize just how many murders, how much killing, the soldiers have witnessed.

Later in the same stanza, the poem uses parallelism to show how the soldiers' psychological pain is as relentless as the threats they faced in war. "Wading sloughs of flesh," "Treading blood from lungs," "batter of guns," and "shatter of flying muscles" are similar enough grammatically that they sound like a kind of onslaught, and prevent the poem from having a moment's respite. Parallelism appears again in the last two lines of the poem to similar effect, describing how the soldiers' repeatedly fail to get any sense of justice from those who caused their trauma:

> Snatching after us who smote them, brother,
> Pawing us who dealt them [...]

Finally, the last stanza then uses anaphora in lines 23 and 25:

> —Thus their heads wear this hilarious, hideous,
> Awful falseness of set-smiling corpses.
> —Thus their hands are plucking at each other;

The repetition aids the way that the speaker draws the reader's attention to the different body parts of the patients in the hospital, and how each one of them reflects an aspect of their internal horror.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Stroke on stroke"
- **Line 9:** "hell," "hellish"
- **Line 11:** "murders"
- **Line 12:** "murders"
- **Line 13:** "Wading sloughs," " of flesh"
- **Line 14:** "Treading blood from lungs"
- **Line 16:** "Batter of guns," "shatter of flying muscles"
- **Line 23:** "—Thus their heads"
- **Line 25:** "—Thus their hands"
- **Line 27:** "Snatching after us who smote them,"
- **Line 28:** "Pawing us who dealt them"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The first stanza mostly consists of rhetorical questions. These are confrontational and provocative, as though the speaker is taking the reader's hand and asking them to look directly at the patients in the war hospital. The questions also build a sense of exasperation and disbelief, reflecting the speaker's understandably weary attitude towards the war.

The first two questions—both in line 1—essentially ask the same thing: who are these men? This isn't a literal question—these men are soldiers trying to recover from their experiences—but is more pitched at asking the reader to consider whether these men are still the people they once were. That is, asking about their identity suggests that this identity has been shattered by the horrible things the men have lived through.

The third question, which runs from line 2 to 4, asks *why* the men sit here in ongoing psychological torture. Essentially, the speaker marvels that humanity could find itself in such a dire situation that would cause people to suffer in this way. The speaker returns to this sentiment at the end of the poem.

The next question wonders about the men's interior states, asking

> [...] what slow panic,
> Gouged these chasms round their fretted sockets?

The speaker can see the men's faces, but not into their minds. Their faces betray their fraught mental state, and this question helps show the way that these men have become distanced from reality.

The final question reiterates the first, asking again "who these hellish?" This opens up the poem for the speaker to provide an answer, with the following stanzas exploring both the men's wartime experiences and how those experiences display themselves in the men's behavior.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "Who are these? Why sit they here in twilight? / Wherefore rock they, purgatorial shadows, / Drooping tongues from jaws that slob their relish, / Baring teeth that leer like skulls' tongues wicked?"
- **Lines 5-6:** "—but what slow panic, / Gouged these chasms round their fretted sockets?"
- **Lines 8-9:** "Surely we have perished / Sleeping, and walk hell; but who these hellish?"

SIMILE

"Mental Cases" uses evocative, grotesque language throughout. The speaker uses both metaphor and simile to shock the reader with horrifying imagery, while also speaking to the way that the men in the hospital struggle with the memories that play out in their imaginations.

The first simile in line 4 compares the way that the men bare their teeth to "skulls' tongues wicked." A skull, of course, doesn't have a tongue—unless it is part of a living human. This powerfully evokes the way that the men are caught somewhere between life and death, and how those in-between state is horrifying to experience ("wicked").

The next simile is in line 21, in which "sunlight seems a bloodsmear." This relates to how the men in the hospital perceive light from the sun. While most people like sunlight, for the damaged minds of these soldiers it reminds them of the spread of blood on skin or clothing. Perhaps this relates more specifically to the kind of reds found in the dawn or dusk sky. This simile shows how, for these men, the horrible memories of wartime experiences are inescapable—even light puts them back on the battlefield.

The final simile is part of the same idea, but refers specifically to dawn, which "opens like a wound that bleeds afresh" (line 22). In a way, this is actually a description of reality. Every new morning—if the men have managed to get any sleep—their psychological wounds re-open, and they are placed back into their world of pain.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "like skulls' tongues wicked"
- **Line 21:** "seems a bloodsmear"
- **Line 22:** "like a wound that bleeds afresh"

IMAGERY

"Mental Cases" is packed with imagery related to death, decay, and hell. The overall aim of this imagery is to shock the reader, and in doing so to give them a sense of the hallucinatory hell in which these soldiers have to spend their days.

The imagery is *intentionally* grotesque and surreal, making the poem feel like it's set hell itself, or some kind of medieval torture chamber. And it's all the more powerful when considering that the poem is based on Owen's actual experiences in Craiglockhart Hospital.

The poem is full of references to particular parts of the body, presented in horrific detail. The men have "dropping" tongues, and "teeth [...] like skulls' tongues," their eyes are "chasms," and the men even have "hilarious, hideous" smiles fixed on their face like those of "set-smiling corpses." These images evoke death and decay, reiterating the sense that the men aren't really alive but rather have become the living dead. Even when not talking about the men themselves, the imagery is grotesque; sunshine is like "a bloodsmear," night is "blood-black," and "dawn breaks open like a wound that bleeds afresh." Again, the imagery is deeply disturbing and gruesome, closely linked to death and decay.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Wherefore rock they, purgatorial ," "shadows"
- **Lines 3-4:** "Drooping tongues from jaws that slob their relish, / Baring teeth that leer like skulls' tongues wicked?"
- **Line 6:** "Gouged these ," "chasms round their fretted sockets"
- **Lines 7-8:** "Ever from their hair and through their hand palms / Misery swelters."
- **Line 11:** "Memory fingers in their hair of murders"
- **Lines 13-14:** "Wading sloughs of flesh these helpless wander, / Treading blood from lungs that had loved laughter."
- **Lines 19-20:** "Therefore still their eyeballs shrink

tormented / Back into their brains"
- **Lines 21-21:** "Sunlight seems a / "
- **Line 21:** "bloodsmear," "; ," "night comes blood-black"
- **Line 22:** "Dawn breaks open like a wound," " that bleeds afresh"
- **Lines 23-24:** "—Thus their heads wear this hilarious, hideous, / Awful falseness of set-smiling corpses"

VOCABULARY

Twilight (Line 1) - The low light cast when the sun is below the horizon.

Wherefore (Line 2) - Archaic form of "why."

Rock (Line 2) - Moving in a back and forth motion (think of a rocking chair).

Purgatorial (Line 2) - An adjective referring to purgatory, which in Christian theology is a place in the afterlife in-between heaven and hell. Possibly a reference to Dante as well.

Slob (Line 3) - Moving in a lazy (slobbish) way.

Relish (Line 3) - Could mean enjoyment, or might be the speaker's inventive way of referring to saliva.

Leer (Line 4) - Look at in an unpleasant way.

Wicked (Line 4) - Evil—this is an adjective applying to "skulls' tongues."

Stroke (Line 5) - A stroke can be a gentle touch, a punch, or the movement of a clock (implying that the men's pain is as regular as clockwork).

Chasms (Line 6) - Cavernous holes.

Fretted Sockets (Line 6) - Worried and tired eyes.

Ever (Line 7) - Always.

Swelter (Line 8) - To swelter is to be uncomfortably hot; to sweat from intense heat.

Perished (Line 8) - Died.

Ravished (Line 10) - Seized by force and/or raped. Can also mean, paradoxically, to fill with pleasure (the grotesqueness of this idea is definitely at play in the poem).

Multitudinous (Line 12) - Numerous.

Wading (Line 13) - Walk with difficulty through something wet like water or mud.

Sloughs (Line 13) - Swamps.

Batter (Line 16) - Repeated strikes.

Carnage (Line 17) - Violent mayhem.

Squander. (Line 17) - Waste.

Rucked (Line 18) - Packed in.

Extrication (Line 18) - The act of getting free of something.

On their sense (Line 20) - To their senses.

Bloodsmear (Line 21) - Blood stain.

Blood-black (Line 21) - As dark as blood.

Afresh (Line 22) - Anew; all over again.

Thus (Line 23) - "That's why."

Set-smiling (Line 24) - The men's faces look as though they have artificially-arranged smiles on them.

Rope-knouts (Line 26) - Refers to both knots and a kind of whip used for torture.

Scourging (Line 26) - Whipping/suffering.

Smote (Line 27) - Beat physically and/or defeated.

Pawing (Line 28) - Hitting clumsily (and weakly) or grabbing at.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Mental Cases" consists of three nine-line stanzas. The poem unfolds by first posing a set of questions, then answering them, before describing the ongoing situation in the hospital. Beyond this, there is no set poetic form. Instead, the poem relies on intense imagery and sound patterning (through devices like alliteration an assonance) to evoke a hellish atmosphere.

The poem begins with a series of questions that introduce the men and their psychological state. Line 10, which marks the start of stanza 2, then provides a definitive answer to the question of who these men are: "these are men" who are haunted by the dead. The rest of the stanza dives into the men's minds, describing their inner turmoil. The final stanza then essentially responds to the first: all that trauma, the poem says, is what makes the men appear like the living dead.

METER

"Mental Cases" is written in trochaic pentameter. This means that each line has five trochees, poetic feet with a stressed-unstressed syllable pattern (DUM-da).

There's something brutal about the sound of this meter. The way each line arrives with a strong stress at the start, and how these stresses tend to be on unsettling words like "Gouged" or "Misery," makes the poem feel a relentless onslaught. Line 3 provides a good example of this effect:

> Drooping | tongues from | jaws that | slob their | relish,

The stresses are intentionally grating on the ear, and attempt to evoke the mental and physical exhaustion felt by the men in the hospital. Here, the falling unstressed syllable also conveys the

way that the men's tongues are hanging out of their mouths. If the stress pattern was the other way round (iambic) it would be nowhere near as effective.

For another example, take lines 13 and 14, in which the trochees make the lines themselves difficult to wade through:

> Wading | sloughs of | flesh these | helpless | wander,
> Treading | blood from | lungs that | had loved |
> laughter.

Notice how the stresses convey the physical effort of trench warfare, as though the reader must trudge through every heavy step. The fourth foot line 14 above has an iambic substitution ("had loved"), but it feels clumsy among such reliable trochees—again suggesting difficulty and tiredness.

RHYME SCHEME

"Mental Cases" does not follow a rhyme scheme. The poem aims to capture the chaotic, confused, and exhausted state of mind that many of the men this hospital have to endure. To make the poem too neat and structured, then, would probably make it sound too calm.

Interestingly, though, each does stanza does feature one irregularly placed rhyming pair. In the first stanza, "relish" meets with "hellish" (lines 3 and 9 respectively). There's something unsettling to the ear about picking up on this rhyme, especially as these are so far apart as to seem more like an echo. This helps the poem build an atmosphere of paranoia and anxiety, especially amongst such an intense barrage of sound patterning (through alliteration, consonance, and assonance).

In the second stanza, "wander" rhymes with "squander" (lines 13 and 17). Notice how both of these words relate to a kind of loss, the first directional and the second relating to human life. Again, functioning as a mere echo, this rhyme provokes unease.

In the final stanza, lines 25 and 27 rhyme "other" with "brother." The "other" refers to the patients' hands, while "brother" is an address to the reader (and the general public at the time). This creates a kind of pair between "us" (the addressees of the poem) and "them" (the soldiers), linking the former with responsibility for the state of the latter.

SPEAKER

Many readers take the speaker in "Mental Cases" to be Wilfred Owen himself. Owen served in WWI, and the poem was based, at least in part, on his experiences recovering in Craiglockhart Hospital in Edinburgh. This institution was set up as a psychiatric unit for soldiers struggling with the psychological effects of the war.

That said, the speaker certainly doesn't have to be equated with the poet. All readers know from the poem itself is that the speaker has intimate knowledge of this kind of institution. The speaker makes close observations of the men in the hospital, and describes their memories of time in battle in vivid, nightmarish detail. This knowledge of both the men and the experience of war suggests that the speaker is also a soldier.

Yet at the end of the poem the speaker identifies with the *reader* rather than the men in the hospital ("Snatching after **us** who smote them, **brother**"); this suggests the speaker identifies with those "who smote them" and "who dealt them war and madness." Or, perhaps, everyone simply looks the same to the traumatized soldiers' eyes. In any case, it's clear that the speaker wants the reader—most likely the British public at the time of the poem's publication—to see that they, too, have played a role in the events that caused the men's suffering. In supporting the war, or not questioning some of its propaganda, responsibility is shared among the population.

SETTING

Though the poem never mentions it explicitly, the setting is a military hospital during WWI. Specifically, it's a psychiatric hospital—an institution set up to aid "mental cases" (those with ongoing psychological problems caused by the war). Owen himself stayed in Craiglockhart Hospital in Edinburgh, which also counts Siegfried Sassoon, another famous war poet, as one if its former patents.

The hospital, of course, is not a happy place. As the speaker makes clear, it's full of pain and suffering. These men have seen such terrible things that their minds have become like "hellish" theaters, re-staging the horrors that they've seen—from daybreak to nighttime. Accordingly, the poem is as much set in the minds of the patients as it is in the hospital itself. Owen suffered from what at the time was called "shell-shock" himself, giving him insight into what it was actually like to escape the war physically but still be in its grip mentally.

The speaker plays with how the setting *seems* like "hell." It's as if, claims the speaker, they have all died during their sleep and are now living through eternal damnation. But, of course, the poem's power comes the fact this is *not* a fantasy, but a terrible reality. For the speaker, World War I has opened up a kind of portal to incredible psychological pain, and the poem presents a sense of time passing day to day and hour to hour with no respite from this suffering.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Wilfred Owen served as a soldier in World War I. In late 1917, Owen was a patient at Craiglockhart Hospital in Edinburgh. He was suffering from "shell-shock"—the same condition that

tortures the "mental cases" in this poem. Owen worked feverishly on his poetry during this stay, and produced not only this poem, but many others, including perhaps his two most celebrated works: "Dulce Et Decorum Est" and "Anthem for Doomed Youth." As in those two famous poems, "Mental Cases" seeks to undercut the glorification of war, instead striving to present an unflinching account of the real and terrible effects of the conflict.

While in Craiglockhart, Owen befriended another celebrated war poet, Siegfried Sassoon. Sassoon had a great impact on the poetry of his friend, suggesting revisions for a number of his poems. In his own poems like "Survivors," Sassoon, too, examined the way that soldiers often remained haunted by their wartime memories. Robert Graves, another writer who served in the war, wrote about similar experiences. An excerpt from his autobiographical account of the war is included in the Resources section of this guide.

It's worth comparing Owen's staunchly anti-war poetry with the jingoistic pro-war poems of writers like Rupert Brooke and Jessie Pope ("Who's for the Game?"). At the end of this poem, the speaker seems to have those who glorify war in mind—including those who presented a dishonest picture of wartime experience without having actually seen it first-hand.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

WWI was a terrible conflict in which around 16 million people died. Those were just the direct deaths—famine, genocide, and the great flu outbreak of 1918-1919 killed many more people after the official end of the conflict. In a title that seems tragically ironic now, WWI was known as "the war to end all wars."

Life in the trenches of Europe was terrifying and deadly, and the poor conditions caused frequent sickness and disease. Owen fought in France, part of what was called the Western Front—the war's main combat theater.

Though "Mental Cases" makes reference to trench warfare, the real "theater" in this poem is in the patient's minds. That is, the poem is more concerned with the ongoing psychological effects of the war than the obviously horrific physical injuries typical of its battles. These men, though they have technically escaped the conflict, re-stage it daily in their imaginations.

Both Owen and Siegfried Sassoon were patients at the Craiglockhart Hospital in Edinburgh, which was dedicated to assisting those soldiers suffering from "shell-shock" (now called post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD). Wartime experience caused untold damage to soldiers' mental states, a problem compounded by the fact that psychological suffering was often condemned as weakness or cowardice.

Even Sassoon—who became famous for his death-defying acts of bravery—suffered from shell-shock. Some soldiers had the double misfortune of being given ineffective, even dangerous, treatments for their condition, including electroshock therapy. It was an army major, Arthur Hurst, who made great innovations for the treatment of this condition, pioneering occupational therapy techniques like giving the men simple agricultural tasks or encouraging them to use their creative talents.

It was during his hospital stay at Craiglockhart that Owen wrote some of his most enduring poetry. 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 on November 11, 1918, with news of his death reaching his parents on the same day that church bells were ringing out to signal the end of the war.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Wilfred Owen's Biography — Read more about the poet's life and work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/wilfred-owen)
- Bringing WWI to Life — Director Peter Jackson discusses his recent WWI film, They Shall Not Grow Old. Through technology, Jackson brings old war footage to vivid life. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_cSXfKSRKz4)
- "Good-bye to All That" — An excerpt from wartime writer Robert Graves's memoir about his experiences in WWI. (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/nov/10/first-world-war-robert-graves-shellshock)
- War Poetry Podcasts — Listen to this series of podcasts from the University of Oxford about various aspects of World War I poetry, including some excellent material about Wilfred Owen. (http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/series/british-world-war-one-poetry-introduction)
- Shell-Shock — An informative article about what is now commonly referred to as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (or PTSD). (https://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/shell-shock)
- 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)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILFRED OWEN POEMS

- Anthem for Doomed Youth
- Dulce et Decorum Est
- Exposure
- Futility
- Strange Meeting
- The Next War

HOW TO CITE

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