

# Wilfred Owen

by Peter Cash



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## Wilfred Owen (1893-1918)

by

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### **SCOPE OF TOPIC**

Wilfred Owen wrote the eight poems for which he is remembered between January 1917 (when he arrived on the Western Front) and November 1918 (when he was killed). The aim of this Bookmark is to do justice to these eight poems and, in analysing them, account for the poet's place in the canon.

In this Bookmark, I aim to be fair to Wilfred Owen.

For forty years, he has been the answer to the English teacher's question: how do you interest boys in poetry? Study Owen and you study war: if the poetry is not in the pity, then it can be in the gore. Which poems do you choose? For its symmetrical structures, not to mention that perfect use of onomatopoeia: *Anthem for Doomed Youth*. For its rhetorical indignation, not to mention 'the blood' that comes 'gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs': *Dulce Et Decorum Est*. For its syntactical parallelisms, its audacious half-rhymes and that ghoulish burying-party: *Exposure*. For its supernatural atmosphere and its verbal inventiveness: *Strange Meeting*. For his spectacular subject-matter and his conspicuous figures of speech, Owen has become an unoriginal choice. Although his reputation may rest on only eight poems, he is not an unoriginal poet.

### **BOOKS TO READ**

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**THE SENTRY (January 1917)**

*The Sentry* is a poem which grows directly out of an isolated incident in the trenches. It is wholly characteristic of Owen in that it focuses on the fate of one private soldier, the eponymous 'sentry' who is blinded and maimed by a 'whizz-bang'. It is an extremely moving poem, for the focus is not only on the sentry's pitiful reaction to his injuries, but also on Owen's own haunted recollection of them.

The situation for the poem is 'an old Boche dug-out' which a party of English troops has taken, but not without being seen: consequently, it comes under enemy fire, 'shell on frantic shell' pounding its position. The co-opted dug-out is a 'hell' on earth, not only because of the artillery bombardment, but also because of the bad weather. It is raining heavily: into the dug-out pour 'waterfalls of slime' with the result that the men stand in 'slush waist-high' and cannot climb out. Even worse is the 'murk of air'. In this genitive phrase, Owen adapts Lady Macbeth's adjective ('Hell is murky') to his purpose; the dug-out is a hell-hole, not only because they cannot see through the smoke of the whizz-bangs, but also because of its olfactory sensations. It 'stank old'; this combination of an Anglo-Saxon past tense and an adjectival adverb conveys the rank odour with a monosyllabic force. Owen's language describes the conditions with verisimilitude; he suggests what it was like to cower and huddle in that enclosed space, its claustrophobic atmosphere redolent of the 'fumes' of cordite and the unhygienic 'smell of men', the German troops who had occupied that position for 'years' before vacating it.

Finally, one of the whizz-bangs hits its target, leaving them gasping for even a 'sour' breath of air. What happens next Owen records by means of onomatopoeic verbs. He accompanies the sentry's entrance into the dug-out with a sequence of u-sounds: 'thud! flump! thud!' Down 'the steep steps' into their trench, he is said to come 'thumping' rather than merely falling or tumbling – so powerful and debilitating was the blast that blew him off his feet and into 'hell'. When they retrieve his 'body' from the Biblical 'flood' of 'slime'/'slush'/'muck', they are surprised to discover that he is still alive.

Owen narrates this episode in rhymed iambic pentameter: in this poem, his metre is regular and his rhymes (lids/squids') are full rhymes that dramatise the action and carry the narrative forward. In *The Sentry*, his verse moves with the formal precision of a sonnet. In this passage, he follows a couplet (which might conclude a sonnet) with a quatrain which might begin one:

We dredged him up, for dead, until he whined  
 'O sir, my eyes – I'm blind – I'm blind – I'm blind!  
 Coaxing, I held a flame against the lids  
 And said if he could see the least blurred light  
 He was not blind; in time they'd get all right.  
 'I can't,' he sobbed. Eyeballs, huge-bulged like squids',  
 Watch my dreams still –

Here, Owen meets the demands of rhyme and metre by a skilful combination of direct speech, indirect speech and plain description. The politeness with which the blinded sentry addresses his commanding officer ('O sir') stands in ironic juxtaposition with his repeated realisation that he has lost his sight, thereby inspiring a deep pity for him. Then, Owen's recourse to indirect speech reproduces the matter-of-fact tone of voice in which he sought to reassure the man: in response to this assured tone, the sentry's direct whine ('I can't') sounds in even sharper conflict. It transpires that the sentry's 'eyeballs' have been reduced to the consistency of jelly; from their sockets, the whites of his eyeballs bulge like squids' eyes. It is this lurid detail [= the liquefied whites of his eyes] that returns to haunt the poet in his 'dreams'.

Chris Woodhead (1984) remarks upon 'a shocking intensity of descriptive detail'. In *The Sentry*, Owen records the continuing chaos by means of hypallage; he transfers the epithet 'shrieking' from the whizz-bangs (which do actually shriek) to the 'air' through which they hurtle – as if the air itself is terrified. In this chaos, he observes 'other wretches, how they bled and spewed' and forgets about the poor sentry. The simple movement of this iambic pentameter –

I try not to remember these things now

– conveys the calm that comes from his selective amnesia; the steady rhythm of the line suggests that he has regained his composure. Respite, however, is only temporary. The blinded and shell-shocked sentry has the last 'word'. His 'moans and jumps' – not to mention 'the wild chattering' of his teeth – resurface in Owen's consciousness and reclaim his attention:

Through the dense din, I say, we heard him shout,  
'I see your lights!' – But ours had long gone out.

His haunting recollection is of the sentry's voice, shouting (through the cacophony caused by the exploding shells) that he can 'see'. He is insisting that he can see in order to reassure both his fellow soldiers and himself. Once more, Owen combines a dialogue and a description to dramatic effect: in the final couplet, the pity for the sentry lies in the poetic juxtaposition of his optimistic speech ('I see your lights') with the plain description ('But ours had long gone out') by which it is embarrassed. The pity proceeds from the dramatic irony at the sentry's expense: he, being blind, does not know – whereas his comrades do – that their lamps have 'long gone out'. Because they can see for themselves, his bravado has an unintended consequence: it exposes his noble pretence that he can see too.

### **EXPOSURE (February 1917)**

Wilfred Owen's technique is to record the perceptions (of which his poems are made up) in a sequence of declarative statements – for which he then seeks an accommodating stanza-form. As a poetic craftsman, Owen's tendency is to create his own stanza-forms; what is more, these stanza-forms are recognisably his. He tends to devise a stanzaic pattern into which his subject + predicate statements will fit, thereby creating syntactical parallels, not only within stanzas, but also between them. No poem illustrates this tendency more clearly than *Exposure*.

*Exposure* consists of eight quintains. In the first four quintains, Owen is a war artist: that is, he depicts the conditions to which men are exposed on the Western Front with a graphic realism. His title then begs a question: to what are the soldiers exposed? Are they exposed to German artillery-fire or to the weather? In this poem, Owen's purpose is ironically to suggest that the weather-conditions of February 1917 are more hostile to human survival than enemy action:

Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knife us ....  
Wearied we keep awake because the night is silent ....  
Low, drooping flares confuse our memories of the salient ....  
Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous ....  
But nothing happens.

*Exposure* is without metre and without any rhythmical effects of audible note. What holds Owen's perceptions in position are the para-rhymes at the ends of his declarative statements: knife us/nervous, silent/salient. It is by verbal means that he seeks to convey acute discomfort: first, he lines up a sequence of vowel-sounds ('merciless iced east winds') which

are not only awkward to pronounce, but which also enact the knifing movements of those 'east winds'; second, he uses aposiopesis to convey the difficulty that the men have in completing their thoughts. The suspended sentences imply the extent to which the soldiers' thoughts have become uncertain: if they can no longer be sure where 'the salient' is, then they have lost both their geographical and psychological bearings. Owen observes that the soldiers' minds must be confused if such a relaxing sound as 'silence' can worry them, cause an edginess [= make them 'curious, nervous']. Such juxtapositions ('Wearied we keep awake', 'Worried by silence') indicate the tension. In military terms, a 'salient' is a battle-field feature that projects into enemy territory; 'the salient' is therefore surrounded by the enemy on three sides, making the troops occupying 'the salient' especially vulnerable to attack. Owen's reference is to the Ypres salient (3rd Battle of Ypres/aka Passchendaele, 1917).

In the second quintain, Owen emphasises that the eponymous 'exposure' is to meteorological conditions. It is to 'the mad gusts' of wind sweeping across the flat battle-field that the men are exposed, not to the battle itself which at that moment is depicted as taking place elsewhere:

Northward, incessantly, the flickering gunnery rumbles,  
Far off, like a dull rumour of some other war.  
What are we doing here?

Whilst the para-rhymes themselves (knife us/nervous, wire/war/here) are consistently effective in communicating an acute discomfort, Owen's other vowel-sounds are active in reproducing the sounds of distant shell-fire: 'gunnery rumbles .... like a dull rumour of some other war'. His use of assonance is onomatopoeic: not only in 'gunn-' and 'rumb-', but also in the other monosyllables, we can hear the thudding of the 'far off' ordnance. Given these perilous circumstances, he ends up questioning the whole purpose of their presence in France.

In the third and fourth quintains, it becomes even clearer that Owen's men have become unable to think coherently and have only empirical evidence of their continuing existences – and it is miserable evidence at that. They have been reduced to the sum of their sensory experiences, stated here in Owen's concise clauses:

The poignant misery of dawn begins to grow ....  
We only know war lasts, rain soaks, and clouds sag stormy.

Dawn, represented by clouds 'massing in the east', is itself presented as a 'melancholy army'; if it were not for the adverbial use of the adjective 'stormy', clumsily predicting the half-rhyme, then the metaphor would be even more dramatic, suggesting (as it does) that every element of the field is inimical to the men's survival. In the fourth quintain, Owen states explicitly that the Manchester Regiment's most formidable enemy is not the Prussian army, but winter and rough weather; as a result, the 'sudden successive flights of bullets' are incidental to the threat that the sub-zero temperatures pose; in this situation, ballistic missiles are 'less deathly than the air that shudders black with snow'. Owen complains too of 'the wind's nonchalance' towards the men's predicament; that is, of its breezy indifference to the freezing squalor of their living conditions. His chorus line – 'But nothing happens' – passes a rueful comment on the men's plight. It is ironic that, for all the hardships they have endured, 'nothing happens': that they are suffering this freezing, frightening squalor for 'nothing'.

In the fifth quintain, Owen imagines an escape from the harsh realities of the French trenches to some corner of an English field. Captain Owen and his front-line soldiers cower under the relentless bombardment of the snow-flakes:

We cringe in holes, back on forgotten dreams, and stare, snow-dazed,  
Deep into grassier ditches. So we drowse, sun-dozed,  
Littered with blossoms trickling where the blackbird fusses  
– Is it that we are dying?

Dug in, 'snow-dazed', they begin to dream of the 'grassier ditches' of home - where the church clock stands at ten to three and there is still honey for tea. In his hallucination, Owen ('Is it that we are dying?') imagines that they have died and gone to the pastoral heaven of an English summer, a peaceful place where they can 'doze', an idyllic spot 'littered with blossoms'. In the sixth quintain, Owen further imagines that, since they have died, only their ghosts will 'drag home' to their closed-up houses where the fire-places are cold and 'the innocent mice' run free.

At the end of this quintain, Owen emerges from his escapist reverie once more to brave the mortal dangers of war-torn France: 'We turn back to our dying'. Worse, war-time France is a ghastly world where men cannot help but feel alienated from God: 'For love of God seems dying'. In the cancelled draft of this poem, Owen's logic actually blames God for the frozen quagmire on which they 'lie':

Tonight, His frost will fasten on this mud and us.

In *Apologia Pro Poemate Meo*, Owen begins: 'I, too, saw God through mud'; here, there is no such cheery vision to console him. The capital H for 'His' (revised later to 'this') holds God responsible for the horrendous conditions. Owen's final perception –

The burying-party, picks and shovels in shaking grasp,  
Pause over half-known faces. All their eyes are ice,  
But nothing happens

– is of a ghoulish burying-party: from each trench, it collects the corpses of men who have died from 'exposure' to the inclement weather: ie. not of war-wounds, but of hypothermia. In this final quintain, the members of the burying-party loom into view like some figures out of a nightmare; they take 'picks and shovels' to these human forms with the inhuman insensibility for which the situation calls. On 4th February 1917, Owen wrote to his mother about the dead 'whose unburiable bodies sit outside the dug-outs all day, all night, the most execrable sights on earth.' Decomposition means that the grave-diggers cannot recognise their cadaverous comrades; they 'pause over half-known faces' with an icy lack of pity ('All their eyes are ice') on which the para-rhyme (us/ice) puts a stamp.

By contrast, Owen himself – here, as in *Futility* – is calling attention to 'half-known' warriors; in so doing, he expresses an unsentimental pity for men whose bodies are carted off without ceremony. At the end of *Exposure*, Owen remains bewildered that, after the futile deaths of even more of his comrades, still 'nothing happens'. Implicit in this third repetition of his chorus is his feeling that these ultimate sacrifices should be for some discernible purpose and marked by some rite more dignified than a nondescript burial. Clearly, he believes that at the very least bells should be rung to mark the passing of these men 'who die as cattle' and who are then carried away like animal carcasses.

### **DULCE ET DECORUM EST (August 1917)**

In this poem, Owen's aim is to register his criticism of Horace's maxim: 'Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori' [= It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country]. His criticism is of the jingoism with which troops were conscripted and sent into battle in the Great War of 1914-1918. Owen's strategy is to confront this patriotic/jingoistic sentiment with a graphic description of trench warfare, thereby embarrassing it, even humiliating it.

Wilfred Owen was a Captain in the Second Battalion of the Manchester Regiment. His first image is of his young soldiers who are 'bent double, like old beggars': that is, they have suffered a loss of both physical and social stature, reduced by the harsh experience of war to

squalid shadows of their former selves. Owen's tactic is a shock-tactic: he presents us with a stark picture of an able-bodied battalion of soldiers who have been physically incapacitated by the rigours of active service. The dogged rhythm of the lines ('we turned our backs'/began to trudge') reproduces the rate at which these foot-soldiers advance. Owen's men can no longer march with military discipline or dignity; instead, they are 'knock-kneed' and unable to breathe easily, coughing up phlegm 'like hags' as if they are Macbeth's witches.

Without their initial optimism, they struggle on foot towards a 'distant rest'; to convey the physical difficulty with which his poor bloody infantry march, Owen relies too upon an onomatopoeic rhyme between 'sludge' and 'trudge', a rhyme in which the udg-sound itself makes the squelching sound of their feet. His declarative statement 'Men marched asleep' is equally effective in communicating the difficulty of such manoeuvres; it is an oxymoron in that it suggests an unnatural conflict between moving and resting. Owen wants to show that the physical confusion of his troops is universal ('All went lame; all blind'); his repetition of 'all' indicates that his troops are physically incapacitated, not in one way or another, but in the same ways.

The first part of this poem takes the form of a sonnet. The function of both the octave and the sestet is purely descriptive, supplying the basis from which Owen can subsequently launch his satirical attack upon the jingoists who sit complacently by their home fires, urging young men to 'trudge' through the mire to their gruesome deaths. At the start of the sestet, Owen introduces four syllables of direct speech – "Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!" – which brings a panic-stricken immediacy to the description. The dramatic sound of the human voice prepares us for the gas-attack from which an individual tommy, 'too clumsy' to don his mask in time, emerges 'yelling and stumbling and floundering'. Owen's use of three present participles, together with two co-ordinate conjunctions, gives the sense of a rapidly-developing tragedy. To convey the horror of this individual death, Owen repeats this grammatical construction: 'guttering, choking, drowning'. The three participle-adjectives pictorialise the infantryman's helpless plunge towards his commanding officer through the green gas. Owen uses 'green' twice in order to indicate that there is no escaping from the ubiquitous fumes and that the piteous appeal for help is futile.

It is in the verse-paragraph which Owen adds to the sonnet that he vents his rhetorical indignation. He points an accusing finger at the armchair-generals and politicians who dare to romanticise such a ghastly experience. In this verse, Owen constructs a hypothesis into which he crafts the graphic image of a single soldier in the throes of asphyxiation. Powerfully, Owen argues that, if the armchair-jingoist could see the vivid effects of the gas, then he would not advocate involvement in trench warfare 'with such high zest'.

Most shocking are the sight of the soldier's eyes 'writhing in his face' and the sound of the blood which comes 'gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs'. Once again, Owen's language derives its dynamic force from an onomatopoeic use of present participles: 'writhing' and 'gargling'. He repeats the subordinate conjunction 'if' and makes an ironic use of 'my friend' in order to personalise/make more direct his attack upon any and every propagandist who might 'lie' to children about 'the actualities of war' (Owen's own phrase). He seeks literally to bring home the brutal and grotesque realities of the Great War. In an early draft, this poem is dedicated to Jessie Pope (1868-1941). Because Pope (*Who's for the Game? The Call*) wrote patriotic verse, glamorising the War and exhorting England's youth to join up, it can be argued that, when Owen inserts the epithet 'my friend', he is not making a rhetorical gesture, but is directing his anger personally at her.

## **ANTHEM FOR DOOMED YOUTH (September 1917)**

My subject is War, and the pity of War.  
The Poetry is in the pity.

In his Preface, Wilfred Owen sounds confident that his vivid descriptions of the conditions on the Western Front will speak for themselves and inspire 'pity' for the soldiers who had to suffer them. Owen's Preface prefaces no poem better than this sonnet which lives up to its melodramatic title by virtue of its rhetorical use of description. There are seven extant drafts of this sonnet; in the first six of them, its title is *Anthem for Dead Youth*.

In the octave, Owen does not set out a thesis, but asks a rhetorical question:

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?

The subsequent seven lines succeed in answering it seven times, each answer taking the shape of a declarative statement on a line of its own. Without any flair for enjambment, Owen is entirely comfortable fitting his phrases of iambic pentameter to the grammatical structure of the form. C. Day Lewis (1963) thought that Owen, 'in the sonnet form particularly', had a gift for legato: 'for keeping the movement of the verse running unbroken through an elaborate syntactical structure'. This sonnet, however, relies for its musical movement upon the chanting of separate responses to the opening question. Each end-stopped line sounds like an anti-war slogan:

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

The verb-less answer is dramatic. Furthermore, the personified gun is 'monstrous' for two reasons: first, Owen's adjective refers to Big Bertha (Dicke Berta) – the epithet given to the heavy-calibre howitzer that the Germans fired; second, it refers to the inhuman disregard of this big gun for human life. After that, the 'only' salute to the glorious dead comes from the sound of rifles. Here is one of the finest examples of onomatopoeia in English poetry; in this sentence, the four alliterated r-sounds, together with four hard a-sounds, reproduce the 'stuttering' effect of rifle-fire; put another way, the combination of alliteration and assonance is functional in the description of the rifle-fire. For those 'who die as cattle', the first irony is that the rifle-noise mimics the sound of hastily said prayers ('orisons').

The cattle-image not only dehumanises sentient human beings, but also suggests that the Western Front is an abattoir, a place of organised slaughter. As a result, actual bells or prayers would make 'mockeries' of the gross manner in which the men die. The second irony is that the only choirs who will sing at their funerals are metaphorical choirs: 'the shrill demented choirs of wailing shells'. Here, the anthem for English youth is sung not by high-pitched voices, but by the mournful 'wailing' of the shells – as if, by a pathetic fallacy, the mortar-fire is vociferously expressing its grief for the fallen. From the drafts, it is surprising to see that Owen did not immediately hit upon the cattle/rattle rhyme; this is because, in his first draft, he begins 'die as herds' and rhymes this simile with 'rattled words'.

In the sestet, Owen does not set out an antithesis, but asks another rhetorical question:

What candles may be held to speed them all?

The subsequent five lines succeed in answering it five times, each answer once more taking the shape of a declarative statement on an iambic line of its own. In each line, the blunt answer is none, for they will be interred where they fell. The very idea that these young men will receive funerals at which choir-boys hold lighted candles is a third irony at their expense. In the sestet, Owen finds an ironic substitute for each of the gestures that might be expected

at a church funeral in one of the 'sad shires'. Equivalent to the pale cloth draped over the fallen soldier's coffin will be the 'pallor' of a bereaved sweetheart's brow upon learning that her boy has been killed in action; equivalent to the lowering of the Union Flag at his graveside will be 'a drawing-down of blinds'. The music of Owen's anthem is composed by the stately movement of each iambic pentameter, culminating in the dead march of this last line which the d-alliteration ('dusk a drawing-down') drums out. At the same time, each image is endowed with a poignancy by the pity that it inspires for the thousands of doomed youths – for whom nothing better can be done; into these poetic images, 'the pity of war' is 'distilled'.

### **INSENSIBILITY (November 1917)**

'Lions led by donkeys' is a phrase popularly used to describe the British infantry of the First World War and to condemn the generals who commanded them. The contention is that the brave soldiers ('lions') were sent to their deaths by incompetent and indifferent leaders ('donkeys').

Wikipedia

In his poetry, Captain Owen endorses the sentiment expressed by this unattributable phrase: namely, that his infantrymen are lion-hearted volunteers sent over the top of their trenches to certain death by 'incompetent and indifferent generals' such as Field Marshal Douglas Haig (1861-1928) who was Commander of British Forces at the Battle of the Somme (1st July-18th November 1916) and the Battle of Passchendaele (31st July-6th November 1917).

Wilfred Owen's most common reflection upon his fallen comrades is not that they have died in vain, but that they have died without ceremony. In Owen's poetry, it is not sweet and fitting to die for one's country when one's country does not care that one has died for it. It exercises Owen that a man should make the ultimate sacrifice and that his contribution should then go unmarked: in *Anthem*, he demands to know where the bells are and where the candles are. Consistently, Owen's response is not to the scale of the slaughter in Flanders, but to an individual death; he pays attention not to the widespread carnage, but to the plight of the individual soldier: 'Move him into the sun' (*Futility*). In *Insensibility*, Owen is moved by this same impulse. Ian Hamilton (2002) attributes Owen's special concern for the individual soldier to his homosexual feeling for 'male beauty': 'It is perhaps this feeling for the bodies of the dead that makes Owen's poetry more moving ....'

*Insensibility* consists of six stanzas which Owen chooses to signify by means of Roman numerals. There is no consistency between either stanza-length or line-length; nor does every line of a stanza rhyme or half-rhyme with another line of that stanza. *Insensibility*, however, is a technical achievement of great cleverness. It owes its complexity both to the syntactical organisation of the statements and to the networks of para-rhyme which endorse them. Jon Stallworthy (1990) asserts that the poem is 'a Pindaric ode': if so, then it is a somewhat ironic celebration of military triumph. In Stanza I, Owen (with echoes of Shakespeare's *Henry V*) argues that the 'men' who are insensible of the dangers they face on the battle-fields of France are the 'happy' ones. Not only do these cold-blooded men go to their deaths unknowingly, but they can also stumble over the bodies of their fallen 'brothers' without pausing to count the cost in human terms:

The front line withers.  
But they are troops who fade, not flowers,  
For poets' tearful fooling:  
Men, gaps for filling,  
Losses, who might have fought  
Longer, but no one bothers.

By contrast, Owen is acutely sensible of the cost and even pauses to make a self-conscious criticism of his 'tearful fooling' with this subject in poetry. He is conscious that, whilst he plays with fancy images ('flowers') and fancy rhymes, his 'men' are dying. His metonym for fallen front-line soldiers ('gaps for filling') is bitterly ironic at the expense of Haig's attitude to the doomed youths under his command. The epithet sums up the fireside- generals' attitude to such 'losses': that is, they are replaceable commodities about whom 'no one bothers'.

In Stanza II, Owen's strategy in this ambitious poem becomes clearer: it is to identify the different categories of men who benefit from one kind of 'insensibility' or another. In Stanza I, he pointed to those men who cope by means of a natural *sang froid*; in Stanza II, he concerns himself with men who 'cease feeling' to the point at which they cease even to calculate their own odds of survival. The horrific experience of front-line service leaves them numb:

Dullness best solves  
The tease and doubt of shelling,  
And Chance's strange arithmetic  
Comes simpler than the reckoning of their shilling.

'Dullness' (that Augustan word for unintelligence) covers the projected state of these minds; they cease even to wonder whether it was worth taking the King's shilling. Having half-rhymed 'themselves' with 'best solves', Owen para-rhymes 'shelling' with 'shilling'; but what about 'arithmetic', one of the most unpromising nouns ever to find itself in a rhyme-position? In Stanza II, there is no rhyme for 'arithmetic'; if, however, we keep open our ears in Stanza III, then we shall hear 'can not more ache', a polysyllabic line-ending just listening for an echo. Between stanzas, there are other correspondences where at first it sounds as if there are blank lines: between 'drags no pack' and 'men attack', between 'dusk' and 'task' and between 'battle' and 'our soul'/^at all' (echoes for which we must wait thirteen/nineteen lines). Inexact though these correspondent recurrences are, they serve deftly to unify a single meditation on the theme of 'insensibility'.

In Stanza III, Owen's third category of 'happy' men is of 'these who lose imagination'. In the trenches, the power of a human imagination is an unnecessarily added burden; there, a man has 'enough to carry with ammunition' and can do without the further encumbrance of thought. The third, fourth and fifth sentences state the situation: namely, that the men's senses (especially their eyes) have been cauterised by the heat 'of battle' with the chilling result that they 'can laugh among the dying, unconcerned'. By their continuous exposure to the sights and the sounds of war, the soldiers have become permanently 'insensible'. He describes them as desensitised to 'the colour of blood'; exploding shells no longer hold any 'terror' for them; their 'hearts' ('small-drawn') no longer go out to their comrades. Such 'insensibility' enables them to carry on regardless of 'the dying' who surround them – an acquired talent for which they seem better off. The implication is that, in their insensible state, such troops are more fortunate than their sad captain who cannot shut his eyes to the bloodshed nor cease to feel pity.

Owen's statements explain the situation, moving fluently from half-rhyme to half-rhyme (red/rid, ever/over) as they do so. D.J. Enright (1961) considers that Owen's 'use of assonantal rhyme' brings to *Insensibility* the 'formal control' that his subject-matter requires without 'the inappropriate chime of rhyme'; this is because the 39 recurrences are only vaguely of sound and very rarely of accent. In Stanza III, Owen's concern is with his own men's lack of concern for their 'dying' comrades; his rhymes express this attitude to casualties with an appropriate casualness.

In Stanza IV, Owen's fourth category of 'happy' soldier comprises those who are still at 'home', presumably awaiting the send-off. This 'lad' is 'happy' because he remains blithely unaware of the unquietness on the Western Front; he is insensible to 'the cess of war' because he has not yet had any experience of it. Nor can he even begin to envisage what

goes on. Because his mind 'was never trained', because he is uneducated, he goes about his military training 'with not a notion'

How somewhere, every dawn, some men attack  
And many sighs are drained.

No lines better express Owen's pre-occupation with the ubiquity of human suffering for which the Great War is responsible. For a lad going through the routine of training at an upland camp, one day is much like another ('worth forgetting'); oblivious to the fate of his brothers in arms, he 'sings along the march'. By contrast, Owen and his men in France 'march taciturn'; they do not feel like singing; silent, they trudge through sludge, 'blood-shod'. Owen's trained men march 'forlorn': that is, without hope (of surviving). This is 'because of dusk'; they know [= are not insensible] that they are moving inexorably towards both a literal and a metaphorical night ('huger night').

In Stanza V, Owen concentrates his attention on the body of a single casualty. In this stanza, his perspective is that of the 'wise' officer. He begins with a rhetorical question: how else, he asks, should an educated man view his role in this conflict

But through his blunt and lashless eyes?

Being imaginative, capable of empathy, Owen puts himself in the place of the man. This is where the casualness of his rhyming (eyes/his) becomes eloquent in the expression of his contempt for the jingoistic generals in England who, blindly committed to this war of attrition, do not care to put themselves in his place. This is where the 'wise' poet, who is *not* insensible to the fate of the single soldier, carries out an assessment of his worth in the blimpish voice of one such general:

Alive, he is not vital overmuch;  
Dying, not mortal overmuch;  
Nor sad, nor proud,  
Nor curious at all.  
He cannot tell  
Old men's placidity from his.

The general's perception is of a creature suspended between living and 'dying'; by means of syntactical parallelism, he balances the adjectives 'vital' and 'mortal' against each other, thereby suggesting that the tommy is hardly more valuable 'alive' than dead. For the general, the ironic beauty of the doomed youth is that, being mortally wounded, he does not strike attitudes: he is neither 'sad nor proud' nor troubled by intellectual curiosity (of the kind that might question the wisdom of his deployment). In fact, the doomed youth is as placid as an old man. The free indirect speech enables Owen to adopt a dual perspective: from the general's point of view, the placid/insensible soldier is dispensable; from the poet's point of view, the soldier might be grateful for his 'placidity' [= his relative 'insensibility'] for it inures him, not only against further shell-shock, but also against the greater 'insensibility' of his superiors, safe in London.

In Stanza VI, Owen's final category consists of men who are neither 'happy' nor 'wise', but 'cursed'; his epithet for them is the 'dullards whom no cannon stuns'. These are the armchair-generals (the 'donkeys') who are themselves in no danger of becoming cannon-fodder. Theirs is an altogether different kind of 'insensibility': an insensibility to the suffering of the troops abroad and their bereaved families at home. Owen's indictment of them –

By choice they made themselves immune  
To pity and whatever mourns in man

– is not only for failing to show 'pity', but also for lacking humanity itself. Other men whom Owen has examined in this poem become 'immune' to human suffering in the course of their shocking experiences; by distinct contrast, these 'dullards' choose to remain 'immune'. War-mongers, they are depicted as being without the capacity to feel compassion for their fellow men. They lack

Whatever mourns when many leave these shores:  
Whatever shares  
The eternal reciprocity of tears.

By means of three noun-clauses, Owen seeks to define the human instinct in which the masters of this war are plainly deficient; his three whatever-clauses are no less powerful for being perfectly iambic in movement and endorsed by a shared rhyme-sound. In this final stanza, 'insensibility' consists of an immunity to fellow feeling, an inability to reciprocate: to be precise, a stony and 'wretched' inability to share with one's fellow man in the showing of pity/in the shedding 'of tears'.

### **FUTILITY (May 1918)**

If not *The Send-Off*, then *Futility* is Wilfred Owen's finest poem.

I. M. Parsons (*Men Who March Away*, 1968) maintains that *Futility* is 'one of the great poems to come out of the War, out of any war'. The recollected situation for this poem is a trench in the bleak mid-winter of 1916-1917 in which Captain Owen's men – namely, the Second Battalion of the Manchester Regiment – were exposed both to the enemy's gunfire and to the harsh weather. The poem is spoken gently over the dead body of a foot-soldier in that battalion:

Move him into the sun –  
Gently its touch awoke him once,  
At home, whispering of fields unsown.

Owen, an officer by the age of 23, orders a party of his men to move their comrade 'into the Sun'. The logic behind this kindly imperative is that, since the sun always woke this man from sleep in an English shire, it should be able to wake him now from that sleep of death. It is with a sardonic knowingness that Owen contrives to forget that there is a difference between the two states.

*Futility* takes the form of a sonnet: although Owen splits his fourteen lines into equal halves, although its metre varies from trimeter to iambic tetrameter, this form is not without its designs upon us. The casual confidence of the half-rhymes – 'once'/'France' and 'now'/'know' – is functional in conveying the wry tone of the speaking voice; consistently, the iambic movement of a line places an accent upon a monosyllable (eg. 'kind') which sounds ironic under the morbid circumstances. Owen's reference to the 'kind old sun' is ruefully ironic: intentionally, he places this sentimental image in a grim context which embarrasses it.

E. L. Black (*Nine Modern Poets*, 1966) considers that *Futility* is 'an epitaph for The Unknown Soldier, for any or every soldier who dies'. He is both wrong and right: without doubt, there is pity in this poetry for the individual member of the Manchester Regiment who will never again feel the warmth of the sun; at the same time, there is – as Black says – a recognition that this known warrior has met the fate of many an unknown warrior. The greatness of this poem lies in the swiftness with which Owen makes the transition from the particular soldier to the Universal Soldier, from this instant in twentieth-century France to pre-history:

Think how it wakes the seeds –  
Woke, once, the clays of a cold star.

Here, Owen makes use of the traditional idea that man was originally formed out of the clay of the earth; in poetic diction, 'clay' is a metonym for 'man'. In this neat way, he is able to embark upon a serious questioning of the purpose of human life. What is its purpose if it is merely to end in the mud of the Somme?

Was it for this the clay grew tall?  
– O what made fatuous sunbeams toil  
To break earth's sleep at all?

By means of this compressed imagery, Owen questions the Christian ethic of the after-life. His rhetorical questions – in which he subsequently makes an unironic use of the sun-image – invite an unequivocal answer: namely, that man's whole existence has no meaning at all if it can end in such worthless squalor. As far as Owen is concerned, the sunbeams which wake men into life are 'fatuous': that is, they need not have bothered. Owen, then, is pointing not only to the 'futility' of war, but also – if warfare is to remain an integral part of it – to the futility of human existence itself. If men were put on this muddy earth merely in order to make one another suffer such misery, then what's the point?

### **THE SEND-OFF (May 1918)**

At the outbreak of the First World War, the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, appointed Horatio Kitchener (1850-1916) as Secretary of State for War. Lord Kitchener was the first member of the British Armed Forces to hold this cabinet post and was given the task of recruiting a large army to fight Germany.

In September 1914, the finger-pointing image of Lord Kitchener, above the words WANTS YOU, appeared on the cover of the weekly magazine *London Opinion*. This magazine cover was designed by the professional illustrator Alfred Leete (1882-1933) and was quickly converted into a recruitment poster. A similar poster used the words YOUR COUNTRY NEEDS YOU and became the most famous image used in the recruitment campaign of the First World War.

Lord Kitchener told Prime Minister Asquith that he expected the war to last at least three years and to involve millions of casualties: by the end of September 1914, over 750,000 men had enlisted; by January 1915, this number had risen to 1,000,000; in the first two years of the War, over 3,000,000 men volunteered. During the first three months of the War, casualties totalled almost 90,000; by mid-1915, this total had risen to 375,000 men even before the autumn offensive of that year and the spring offensive of 1917 which inspires Owen's first poems.

The monochrome footage of these volunteers supplies the context for *The Send-Off*. Proud to enlist and idealistic about their chances of military success, these men march through towns and villages past locals lining the streets to give them a good 'send-off'. In these clips of black-and-white film, the dramatic irony is entirely at the expense of their cheerful faces: whereas they do not know what fate awaits them, Kitchener does. In Owen's poem, there is no such irony, for, by May 1918, both Owen and the recruits from the 'upland camp', embarking by train for France, share a 'grim' knowledge of the mortality-rates on the Western Front. Here, it is this knowledge that informs Owen's 'poetry' and inspires 'pity' for them.

From the five drafts of *The Send-Off*, it becomes apparent that Owen experienced protracted difficulty in deciding upon the form of this poem. Although the rhyme-sounds (-ay and -ed)

do not vary, the stanza-lengths do; he experiments with a five-line, a three-line and a four-line stanza. Upon the page, the final draft *appears* to settle for a three-line stanza followed by a two-line stanza followed by a five-line stanza, this pattern repeated once; upon hearing the rhyme-scheme, it becomes clear that typography alone stands in the way of four five-line stanzas. Only a closer reading of the poem reveals Owen's logic. The mood of the poem is a 'grim' optimism, a good-humoured resignation to fate:

Down the close, darkening lanes they sang their way  
To the siding-shed,  
And lined the train with faces grimly gay.

One cultural feature of the Great War was the repertoire of morale-boosting songs which the foot-soldiers 'sang'. Here, the men marching 'down' Yorkshire lanes are to be imagined singing one of the following refrains: *It's a Long Way to Tipperary* (Jack Judge, 1912), *Pack up your Troubles in your Old Kit-Bag* (George and Felix Powell, 1915) or *Roses of Picardy* (Haydn Wood and Frederick Weatherley 1916). The oxymoron is significant: because they know what lies ahead, they sing 'with faces grimly gay'. In his second and his third drafts, Owen has them proceeding not towards the literal 'siding-shed' but towards 'the cattle-shed', a metaphor for the siding-shed that echoes his proleptic opening of *Anthem for Doomed Youth*. Consequently, these newly trained recruits sing to keep up their spirits, to keep their upper lips stiff. In other words, they put on brave 'faces', masking their awareness of the troubles which they have packed up in the kit-bags on their backs.

The first three drafts of *The Send-Off* are entitled *The Draft*. It is the ambiguous attitude of these men to 'the draft' [= conscription into a war-time army] which accounts for the typographical lay-out of the poem. The two two-line stanzas are separated from the two three-line stanzas (with which they rhyme) because both refer to the eagerness of local womenfolk to pin sprays of 'white' chrysanthemum to the lapels of the men's uniforms; both two-line stanzas then bring out the irony of this ritual, performed by the 'women' to wish the men luck as they wave them goodbye, but at the same time calling to mind the similar way in which men's corpses are dressed in their coffins ('As men's are, dead'). In the second two-line stanza, Owen wonders whether the men whom they sent off with such wild enthusiasm are already dead, thereby mocking that patriotic enthusiasm: 'what women meant who gave them flowers'. If they have already been killed in action, then their deaths make a mockery of the good luck charms with which they were garlanded.

The situation for this poem is a village below an 'upland camp' [probably, the Northern Command Depot at Ripon] at which conscripts from another part of the country have been trained. Even though these raw recruits are strangers to that neck of the woods, they are given a 'send-off'; old men, women and children (to whom they are not known) turn out to see them off to France. Owen's concise use of personification –

Then, unmoved, signals nodded, and a lamp  
Winked to the guard"

– points to a conspiracy in which the rail network (LNER) itself is implicated. If 'signals nodded', then they must have moved literally; if they were at the same time 'unmoved', then it must be that they were metaphorically 'unmoved' by [= emotionally indifferent to] the imminent doom of these youths. If 'a lamp winked to the guard', then it must have done so conspiratorially. Owen's explicit simile ('like wrongs hushed-up') asserts that, by this stage of the War, Prime Minister David Lloyd George and his generals knew how morally 'wrong' it was to persist with a discredited war of attrition, but persisted nevertheless, opting instead for a cover-up.

The final stanza envisions a probable home-coming. The answer to Owen's rhetorical question –

Shall they return to beatings of great bells  
In wild train-loads?

– is no. They will not receive their just deserts and 'return' amid scenes of 'wild' jubilation to 'a land fit for heroes' (Lloyd George, 1918). Much more likely is the contrary scenario:

A few, a few, too few for drums and yells,  
May creep back, silent, to still village wells  
Up half-known roads.

Contrary to original expectations, their home-comings will be unheroic: rather than sing their way, 'a few' (x 3) will 'creep back' to their respective villages up roads which their shell-shocked faculties can only 'half' remember. Owen brings this poem to an appropriate anti-climax by his unobtrusive use of rhyme. The final rhyme is not masculine, but feminine; he does not rhyme 'loads' with 'roads', but 'wild train-loads' with 'half-known roads'. He creates the necessary bathos by means of a compound noun 'train-loads' and a compound adjective 'half-known' which both shift emphasis from the rhyme-sound '-oads' and thereby ensure that the poem does not end on a triumphant note. Such 'poetry' creates 'pity' for the men who boarded their trains, if not in high hopes, then in good faith.

### **STRANGE MEETING (September 1918)**

*Strange Meeting* recounts the neurasthenic nightmare of a soldier who appears to be sleeping on the Western Front. In the first three lines of the poem, we are led to believe that Captain Owen is trying to 'escape' from the horrors of the war in which he is involved:

It seemed that out of battle I escaped  
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped  
Through granites which titanic wars had groined.

But he cannot 'escape' even by dreaming, for, as he walks down the 'dull tunnel' of sleep, he has a nightmare-vision: no sooner is he in his dark and deep 'tunnel' than he encounters the figure of an 'encumbered sleeper'. Since he does not know whether this figure is alive or dead, theirs is a 'strange meeting'. When Owen probes him, the nightmarish figure promptly gets up and stares at him 'with piteous recognition'. When he fixes on Owen his corpse-like stare, there is a chilling moment of anagnorisis.

C. Day Lewis (1963) observes that 'Owen was not a technical innovator except in one respect – his consistent use of consonantal end-rhymes.' At this stage of the poem, Owen is writing in couplets in which the lines para-rhyme with each other (bestirred/stared, grained/ground). By means of these para-rhymes, Owen creates the solemn word-music of the poem; it is by means of these dissonant rhymes that he creates his nightmare-effects. Although the rhyme-scheme threatens to take over the poem, it is actually functional in creating Owen's uneasy feeling, his sensation that all is not right. His 'strange meeting' has an undeniably supernatural air.

T. S. Eliot (1964) confirms that *Strange Meeting* is 'a technical achievement of great originality'. By means of his consonantal end-rhymes, Owen composes a funeral music. In this poem, his rhyme-words jar on each other with an unnerving relentlessness:

And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall,  
By his dead smile, I knew we stood in Hell.

Here, Hell is both a geographical and a psychological state; here, peopled by such vivid figures, it is given a concrete dimension, an eerie atmosphere. The jarring rhymes compose

an accompaniment to this guided tour of Owen's own hell, his haunted conscience. In these 'strange' couplets, Owen is describing a country of the mind in which grotesque figures may spring out at him at any moment. In his paintings, the Dutch artist Hieronymous Bosch (1450-1516) portrayed ugly figures; regardless of the misnomer, British Forces came to call the German enemy by the German-sounding name of 'Bosch'. Down the 'dull tunnel' of his dream, Owen encounters a character who could well loom off a Bosch canvas. Another explanation of this epithet involves the Haber-Bosch Process by which German munitions were manufactured: in 1908, this chemical process was patented by Fritz Haber; in 1910, Carl Bosch, working for the chemical company BASF, commercialised it; its first use on an industrial scale was by the Germans in World War I. In *The Sertry*, Owen uses the spelling 'Boche'; in this form, the word derives from a French slang term for 'stubborn' or 'wooden-headed': ie. one who lives in a 'bosky' area, a wood. Even more simply, Adrian Barlow (1995) explains that the epithet is derived from a French slang term for 'rascal'.

Owen addresses this figure by the oxymoronic epithet 'strange friend'. Certainly, the Bosch/Boche soldier is something of a sage: in an ironic tone of voice, he tells Owen that there is nothing to 'mourn' in this war except 'the undone years' of his life [ie. the years by which his life was cut short] and 'the hopelessness' that modern warfare itself engenders. What worries Owen's 'strange friend' is that 'the truth' of war may remain 'untold' and that succeeding generations will not be aware of 'the pity of war, the pity war distilled'. Above all others, these lines give point to Owen's assertion in his Preface that 'the poetry is in the pity': that, for the soldiers on both sides, no response other than pity is adequate.

*Strange Meeting* is a humanitarian poem of the first order: as such, it ought to be spoken in No-Man's Land: as the Englishman and the German share a common fate, so they deserve a common pity. In the next couplet, the Bosch-figure wonders if men will 'go content with what we spoiled' and live happily ever after; he wonders whether the Great War will be 'the war to end all wars' (President Woodrow Wilson) or whether men will be 'discontent' and go on to fight a second world war. Owen's subject is 'the cess of war'. He sees it as his duty to notify the world of the 'bloody' experience of war and to express pity for those who are embroiled in this particular war – for which the stinking mud of the trenches ('the cess') becomes a metaphor.

*Strange Meeting* ends with a dramatic shock because the stranger whom Owen has met is waiting with an irony at his expense. At this point, it becomes clear that Owen's poem owes a debt to Thomas Hardy's *The Man He Killed* (1902) in that the man he meets turns out to be the ghost of the fellow soldier into whom he had thrust his bayonet on the previous day:

'I am the enemy you killed, my friend.  
I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned  
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.'

The rich irony proceeds from the skilful organisation of an iambic pentameter in which 'enemy' and 'friend' occur in grammatical juxtaposition. The German soldier knows Owen only 'in this dark' for the simple reason that he did not have the time to know him in the light of day. It is important to note that Owen 'frowned' when he 'jabbed and killed' this man: because the German's hands were 'cold', he could only parry his attacker's jabs; consequently, Owen hardly had the heart to kill him/could only just go through with it. It is for this reason that the stranger refers to Owen as 'my friend'; in accordance with this kind logic, he expresses 'pity' for him. After all, Owen, in the twenty-four hours since the killing, has been suffering in a mental hell.

The last half-line of the poem – 'Let us sleep now....' – is ironic because, although the fellow-soldier whom Owen has killed may be able to 'sleep', Owen, not being dead, is unable to 'sleep' because he is haunted – not only by this surrealistic visitation, but also by an apocalyptic vision of mankind's future. To this extent, the Bosch-figure works upon Owen's conscience with the moral force of Banquo's Ghost. Ultimately, *Strange Meeting* gives point to Owen's claim in his Preface that 'All a poet can do today is warn'. Its evangelical sub-text seeks to 'warn' us that, if man continues to fight wars, then his conscience will continue to be haunted.

## APPENDIX

For some reason, OCR's current prescription of Wilfred Owen's poems (for its AS Module F661) excludes *The Send-Off*, but includes *The Last Laugh*, pairing it with *Futility*. For this reason, my analysis of *The Last Laugh* is appended here:

### THE LAST LAUGH (1918)

Living in the trenches, Owen's thinking is conditioned by his first-hand experience of death on a daily basis. In this poem, he presents three of the expletives uttered by dying soldiers in response to the immediate possibility of death: in particular, he pays respect to the various gestures (often invoking loved ones) with which these men have greeted their sudden ends. From his use of direct speech, it is plain that this poem has grown directly out of Owen's hearing the vocal gestures of his men to the realisation that they have been mortally wounded ('hit') and that their deaths are imminent. Each five-line stanza proceeds to dramatise the ironic lack of dignity which the gun-fire and the shell-fire show them.

Owen derives his title from a metaphorical expression: proverbially, it is said that a man who ends up winning a drawn-out argument has 'the last laugh'. In this context, 'the last laugh' is a metaphor for a victor's expression of eventual triumph over an opponent who deserves his come-uppance and to whom no magnanimity will be shown. In this poem, Owen personifies the weaponry which kills his comrades so that each weapon can in turn be heard having 'the last laugh' at the expense of the soldier whose life it ends. In their personified forms, the weapons (bullet or bayonet, gun or gas) can be imagined as literally having 'the last laugh' at soldiers who thought that they could dodge them.

Like *Exposure*, *The Last Laugh* is a poem in which Owen accommodates single perceptions within a formulaic stanza-form. Despite its grim subject-matter, there is an extent to which this poem is a literary exercise. The earlier draft of the poem, enclosed in a letter to his mother Susan dated 18th February 1918, reveals that he had decided upon the formal shape of the poem, but had still to wring changes upon the verbs. In this poem, Owen's technique is to juxtapose the pitiful appeals of the soldiers ("O Jesus Christ!", "O Mother, mother! Dad!", "My Love!") with the personified reactions of the weapons to their cries for pity:

The Bullets chirped – In vain! vain! vain!  
Machine-guns chuckled – Tut-tut! Tut-tut!  
And the Big Gun guffawed.

The capital letters give each weapon a personal identity and prepare us for the human mirth with which each goes about its deadly business; significantly, the three verbs – 'chirped', 'chuckled' and 'guffawed' – are synonymous expressions of glee. What is more, the sounds that they make ('Tut-tut') are onomatopoeic admonishments of the soldiers' effrontery. Their very vowel-sounds, amplified by exclamation-marks, express a patronising disapproval of the tommies for literally being so bold as to go over the top of their trenches. They ensure that 'the last' sound which the dying men hear is a sound of harsh, unsympathetic hilarity.

In the second quintain, the machinery of warfare proceeds to express its contempt for the soldiers' folly in mounting an attritional charge against it. Here, Owen asks us to imagine that a 'lofty Shrapnel cloud' has somehow indicated to another fallen infantryman that he is a 'Fool!' In the second stanza, the eponymous laughter becomes derisive laughter: in a further personification, 'the falling splinters spat and tittered'. By these two verbs, the guns and the shells are depicted as mocking men's feeble attempts to withstand them. Because they are consistent with the effects of 'chuckled' and 'guffawed', the verbs 'spat and tittered' (whilst they may lack precision) reinforce the idea that the artillery is treating the men's bravery not with callous indifference, but with scorn.

In the third quintain, Owen interests himself further in the ironic look on the face of the Belgian earth as it confronts the dying soldier. It is ironic at the expense of the young soldier's passion for his wife or sweetheart that, as he falls 'slowly', he kisses not her mouth, but the unromantic mud: 'his whole face kissed the mud'. At this sorrowful spectacle, the Bosch/Boche artillery is presented as laughing/rejoicing:

And the Bayonets' long teeth grinned;  
Rabbles of shells hooted and groaned;  
And the Gas hissed.

Owen's metonym for the row of bayonets ('Bayonets' long teeth') portrays them as smirking human beings; his onomatopoeic verbs imagine that 'rabbles' of people have 'hooted and groaned' with derision at the soldier's sentimental passing. The Gas – also endowed, by the capital letter, with a personal identity – is equally disrespectful of suffering humanity: thumbs down, it 'hissed'. In this poem, Owen's rhymes are not so much half-rhymes (in which the vowels change, but the consonants remain) as para-rhymes; across the three stanzas, his technical ambition is simply to end every one of the fifteen lines with a word which ends in a d-sound. Given that the aim of the poem is to express the resounding contempt of ammunition for men, it is surprising that he should leave the final jibe to a past-tense verb which makes no triumphant rhyme-sound. In poetic terms, it jars that the poem itself does not end on an emphatic note: that is, with a 'last laugh'.

Readers may also be interested in Bookmark No. 12, *Some First World War Poets*: Lisa Broadway [Poets covered: Rupert Brooke; Wilfred Owen; Siegfried Sassoon; Isaac Rosenberg; Robert Graves] and Bookmark No. 22, *Isaac Rosenberg and Keith Douglas*: Louise Williams.

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