

# Insensibility (April 1918)

Assertive opening phrase is countered by the equal assuredness that these men will be 'killed'.

I  
 Happy are men who yet before they are killed  
 Can let their veins run cold.  
 Whom no compassion fleers  
 Or makes their feet  
 Sore on the alleys cobbled with their brothers.

The couplet's conceptual focus lies with the emotional numbness that often precedes it.

Soldiers are desensitised to feelings of compassion, mocked by so much shedding of blood that metaphorically, their veins have 'run cold'.

High modality continues, suggesting that these beliefs are borne out by the poet's personal experience.

The front line withers,  
 But they are troops who fade, not flowers  
 For poets' tearful fooling:  
 Men, gaps for filling

Metonymy 'front line withers' stresses that such loss of life demands more than a poet's 'tearful fooling'.

There have been so many corpses that not only do their skulls cobble their path but 'no one bothers'.

Losses who might have fought  
 Longer; but no one bothers.

The 'losses' are just 'gaps for filling, forcing some, in the flow on stanza, to cease 'feeling' at all.

## II

And some cease feeling  
 Even themselves or for themselves.  
 Dullness best solves  
 The tease and doubt of shelling,  
 And Chance's strange arithmetic  
 Comes simpler than the reckoning of their shilling.  
 They keep no check on Armies' decimation.

Such mindlessness or 'Dullness' is their coping strategy for survival.

132

Standard Modules and Electives — A resource book for teachers

Their survival is governed by fate and 'Chance's strange arithmetic'. They accept that they have no control.

Para-rhyme 'shelling'/'shilling', broken rhythm and rhyme.

## III

Happy are these who lose imagination:  
 They have enough to carry with ammunition.  
 Their spirit drags no pack.  
 Their old wounds save with cold can not more ache.  
 Having seen all things red,  
 Their eyes are rid  
 Of the hurt of the colour of blood for ever.  
 And terror's first constriction over,  
 Their hearts remain small drawn.  
 Their senses in some scorching cautery of battle  
 Now long since ironed,  
 Can laugh among the dying, unconcerned.

The repeated term 'Happy' sardonically mocks how their 'spirit' and 'imagination' has been stripped away by war's the cauterising horrors.

Having so much to 'carry', their hearts have become 'small drawn' and emotionally unresponsive and 'unconcerned'.

Irregular stanza length is characteristic of free verse and the poet's stream of consciousness as he contemplates the dehumanising results of war experience.

Word repetition 'of' stresses what they have been forced to experience while word inversion places key words at the end of lines for added stress.

Those still home and thereby ignorant of the truth are perhaps the happiest for they are yet to feel the war's impact.

Naivety is a refuge for such lads who can still sing without 'a notion' of what soldiers on the front must face. Training cannot prepare men for the 'larger day to huger night'

'We wise' and archaic terms like 'besmirch' echo battle scenes from Shakespeare's Henry V. Officers have been similarly blooded but Owen queries how they can 'see our task' if their feelings also become blunted.

Repetition of negative terms, 'not', 'nor' and 'cannot' stress their emotional deterioration.

Those 'dullards' who are 'as stones' without pity or compassion are 'cursed' for their state was self-imposed. They have chosen to become 'immune/To pity'.

Where soldiers have lost their sensitivity and humanity, the 'dullards' have knowingly become so.

IV

Happy the soldier home, with not a notion  
How somewhere, every dawn, some men attack,  
And many sighs are drained.  
Happy the lad whose mind was never trained:  
His days are worth forgetting more than not.  
He sings along the march  
Which we march taciturn, because of dusk,  
The long, forlorn, relentless trend  
From larger day to huger night.

Use of the Roman numerals subtly reinforces how men are made mechanised automatons; stripped of feelings and humanity.

Euphemisms for death, 'sighs are drained' juxtapose trainees and taciturn veterans

V

We wise, who with a thought besmirch  
Blood over all our soul,  
How should we see our task  
But through his blunt and lashless eyes?  
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.

Inclusive language, 'we' and 'our' and the mid-stanza rhetorical question mark a shift in focus-questioning an officer's role for those under his command.

Such men 'Alive' are not vital commodities, neither 'mortal', 'sad', 'proud' nor 'curious'. His 'placidity' much like the dementia.

VI

But cursed are dullards whom no cannon stuns,  
That they should be as stones.  
Wretched are they, and mean  
With paucity that never was simplicity.  
By choice they made themselves immune  
To pity and whatever mourns in man  
Before the last sea and the hapless stars;  
Whatever mourns when many leave these shores;  
Whatever shares  
The eternal reciprocity of tears.

These could be the civilians at home who remain ignorant of the truth.

It could also be the generals who wage this horrid war without mourning the loss of many. Owen again uses euphemisms 'many leave these shores'.

Such men remain callously indifferent; they do not respond to the suffering of others or shed any tears.

## Overview

Critics have noted a link between 'Insensibility' and the poem 'Character of the Happy Warrior' by William Wordsworth which has the following opening lines;

"Who is the happy warrior? Who is he  
That every man in arms should wish to be"

An ode form is subverted to strengthen Owen's bitter cynicism about the hideous consequences of war. Rather than offer a traditional eulogy about the glory or valour of war and its soldiers or as Wordsworth suggests, its warriors, Owen's savage refutation gives the confronting assertion that survival in war typically demands that combatants must shed emotions, imagination, thoughts and above all compassion. Odes written by poets like Blake or Keats are typically written in praise of something or someone, but instead, Owen uses the ode poetic form for ironic condemnation. Captain Wilfred Owen acerbically mocks Wordsworth's sentimentality by using the opening and later echoed phrase, 'Happy are these...' to demonstrate that no form of happiness is possible in war. In different ways, a process of desensitisation or distancing from the everyday hellish reality of the battlefield is needed. By linking happiness and dehumanisation, Owen shows how soldiers existing in the midst of senseless slaughter must guard themselves against feeling too much or too deeply and to varying degrees, allow themselves to become robotic automatons.

The pessimistic tone links to this loss of humanity for all combatants whether soldier, poet or officer. He acknowledges that empathy, compassion or concern for the suffering of others can become an unendurable burden and that toughness and self-control help men withstand war's assault on their sensibilities. At the same time however, Owen pities how many soldiers have to dull the senses, numb the heart and 'let his veins run cold' in order to survive another day. Purging themselves of all feeling and becoming emotionally barren becomes a necessary coping mechanism. From a poet-soldier's perspective however, this paradoxically challenges a poet's capacity to contemplate and communicate heightened emotions and perceptions. This jockeying of feeling and sanity becomes a Herculean task as borne out by changing attitudes reflected in Owen's letters which voice private assertions that are reflected in his verse. Shortly after Owen had been diagnosed with shell-shock and unfit for duty, he wrote to his mother, describing himself as being, 'a conscientious objector with a very seared conscience.' When he returned to duty the following year, he was quickly awarded the Military Cross in August for having, 'personally manipulated a captured machine gun in an isolated position and inflicted considerable losses on the enemy. Throughout he behaved most gallantly.'

In a letter to Sassoon on 10<sup>th</sup> October about another battle, just weeks before he died on 4<sup>th</sup> November, he said, 'I cannot say I suffered anything; having let my brain grow dull... My senses are charred.' It is this very aspect of emotional cauterising that is explored within 'Strange Meeting', this half-dead state of being that stultifies thought and feeling. That is why the final stanza castigates the warmongers and generals who direct events from afar, safe from the psychological battering the men in the trenches are forced to endure. Safe from the front, they have ignored the decimation of lives as being just 'gaps for filling'. Owen's humanitarian outlook condemns the hypocrisy of those 'dullards' with hearts 'as stones' rather than the heartless soldier. Owen's poetry focuses on the plight of the common soldier, and the piteous futility, hopelessness and self-sacrifice of war. What makes his poetry distinctive is his amazing manipulation of not only poetic form, structure and techniques but mastery of language itself, conveying not only war's horror but warning future generations that the costs are so great that such bloodshed should not be allowed to happen again.

## Detailed Analysis

### Structure

- Free verse structure is marked by irregular stanza length and a broken rhythm and irregular metre.
- There is an elaborate networked use of pararhymes, described by Owen himself as 'tuneless tendencies' in a letter he wrote to his cousin Leslie Gunston from Ripon on 21<sup>st</sup> April, 1918.
- TD. J. Enright has identified 39 recurrences of assonantal rhyme (red/rid, ever/over) and while it is not necessary to be so explicit when evaluating the poem's structure, it does reinforce Owen's distinctive attention to prosody or the art of versification with close attention to rhyme, stanza form and the quantity and stress of syllables.
- Other critics have praised the poem's technical cleverness and syntactical complexity
- Each of the six stanzas is signified by Roman numerals, evaluating differing types of 'happiness', attitudes and consequences.
- Stanza 1-3 talks about the soldiers' experience during the war and how it is reflected in varying ways in the soldier's behaviour and outlook.
- Stanza 4 talks about the soldiers on leave and how their ignorance shields them from the harsh reality that veteran troops face on the war front itself.
- Stanza 5 is written from Owen's point of view regarding how poets tell the truth about war. He also adopts the voice of unfeeling generals who only see the soldiers in statistical rather than human terms and deal with them as if they were only cannon fodder rather than men.
- Stanza 6: refers to the people back home, the 'dullards,' who have no excuse whatsoever to steel their emotions against pity or empathy. Whether identified as inept generals or an ignorant civilian population, the target of Owen's scorn in the final stanza are rebuked and 'Cursed'. They either actively promote the war or raise no outcry about its human cost.



## Conceptual Focus

- Owen's focus in this poem is not on the plight of an individual soldier as it is in 'Futility' or the specific horrors of battle as found in 'Dulce Et Decorum est' but rather on the relentlessly corrosive impact of war on the common soldier.
- Personal experience authenticates the observations he conveys about how the appalling conditions of the front can often only be borne if combatants make themselves insensitive and in the worst cases emotionally barren.
- Owen knew how those who suffered shell shock lost their sense of self but here he focuses on how emotional and psychological suffering can strip away the capacity for pity and compassion for all soldiers.
- Men are degraded and dehumanised when they are treated as commodities and as 'gaps for filling' and so in the opening stanza, he speaks of a distorted sort of happiness that comes to men so desensitised that their veins have literally and metaphorically run cold.
- With so many dead, no one cares about the losses on an individual level; such compassion is useless and so it is easier to function by becoming seemingly indifferent to battlefield dangers and the suffering of others.
- Owen shifts in the second stanza from emotional imperviousness to another group of so-called 'happy' soldiers who have become so numbed that they 'cease feeling' even about their own survival. Emotions are just an added hindrance and burden.
- 'Dullness' has made them barely conscious even of the senseless and irrational course of the war and the personified randomness of 'Chance's arithmetic'.
- Wandering thoughts and introspection can be dangerous for men in battle and those men 'who lose imagination', mentioned in the third stanza, have lost the capacity for thought.
- Explicit word choice conveys how overwrought by constant exposure to artillery, terror and blood, men become 'insensible'; their senses seared and their eyes cauterised.
- Not only do they not waste tears on the countless dead but they also no longer care about themselves for they have been left so broken that they 'can laugh among the dying, unconcerned.'
- Paradoxically, such men are more fortunate and 'happy' than those who cannot close their minds or eyes to senseless bloodshed.
- Readers are challenged by this dichotomous equating of happiness with emotional emptiness.
- Stanza Four focuses on the happiest soldiers of all; those still in training at home and so oblivious of the horrors to come. Unlike their brothers in arms, who 'march taciturn and forlorn, the happy lad 'whose mind was never trained' still 'sings along the march'. This juxtaposition between seasoned soldiers and trainees is signalled by the pronoun switch from 'They' to 'We'.
- Owen's right to speak for his fellow soldiers is similarly marked by 'We wise'. Equally besmirched by blood, Owen ponders how collectively; poets 'should see our task' and do their job rationally, without curbing either creativity or imagination. This paradoxical dilemma is conveyed via a rhetorical question, 'But through his blunt and lashless eyes?'
- He also contrasts the 'wise' with soldiers who are not 'sad, nor proud, / Nor curious at all'.
- Owen can comprehend his men's perspective and can also seamlessly assume the attitudes and voice of a jingoistic general.
- Syntactical parallelism is achieved by balancing the adjectives 'vital' and 'mortal' to infer that to those in control, the common soldier is just as valuable 'alive' or dead.
- Stripped of intellectual curiosity or imagination, soldiers become as placid as old men but the censure of the last stanza is for insensible 'dullards' who held the fate of soldiers in their hands but have knowingly closed their hearts to compassion.

# Distinctive Use of Language and Poetic Techniques

## Stanzas I and II

- Numbered stanzas give the poem a visual mechanical structure. This reinforces how the soldiers have become robotic, with little if any sign of personal feelings or individual thought.
- The opening line is spaced out by the placement of three very important terms; 'Happy', 'yet' and 'killed' which asserts in unequivocal terms, that death can ironically be seen as a welcomed release by soldiers traumatised by battle fatigue and the horrors of war.
- Enjambment gives fluidity to the lines, evoking the idea that as the men march along, the poet narrator contemplates the realities of what men are forced to become.
- Emotional pressures and burdens of coping with constant bombardment overload the literal weight of packs and ammunition.
- There is real conviction in what is voiced, a sense of aching torment of being able to comprehend why it is in fact easier for men who 'Can let their veins run cold'. The emphasis on the word 'Can' suggesting that some can retain sufficient humanity to resist such a temptation.
- Owen categorises different forms of insensibility, using archaic or rarely used terms to throw focus on what is being said. Those 'Whom no compassion fleers' is an example of the poet's masterful use of explicit diction for 'fleers' conveys those soldiers who have become so brutalised by war that they can now laugh, mock or sneer impudently at the ravages of war but at the cost of no longer being able to empathise with the suffering of others.
- Owen's brilliant use of word reversal for added effect is also evident in the fourth and fifth flow on lines for the literally 'sore' feet of the trudging soldiers is used metaphorically to show that they are now impervious and insensible to pain and so can march roughshod over 'alleys cobbled with their brothers'.
- Nature imagery is also used in atypical ways to challenge the readers' sensibilities. His phrase the 'front line withers' serves as a visual depiction of how the youthful vigour, physical and emotional health is leached from those who experience war. The metaphor is further extended in the following line when Owen rebukes his 'tearful fooling' in the face of so much death, stressing there can be poetic sentimentality when it is men 'who fade, not flowers'.
- The commodification of humanity is communicated by euphemisms like 'losses' instead of death, showing how soldiers become mere parts of the war machine, meaningless components on a production line of death.
- They are replaced when they die, signifying mere 'gaps for filling' but their deaths are collateral damage and 'no one bothers'.
- Some 'cease feeling' altogether either about themselves or others, the link with ideas voiced in the opening stanza stressed by the opening connective term 'And'.
- Such men become metaphorically, the walking dead without sensibility, having reached a stage where 'Dullness best solves' the physical and psychological battering of war.
- For them insensibility offers relief from a situation they cannot escape, an inability to no longer think, speculate or consider the senselessness of it all is better than trying to rationalise the vagaries of 'Chance's strange arithmetic'. The capitalised word 'Chance' is another visual marker that war is horrifically incomprehensible in a sane world.
- Mathematical imagery, 'reckoning of their shilling and 'decimation' reinforce that there is no place for humanity in war.

### Stanza III and IV

- 'Happy' is again used sarcastically to suggest that losing 'imagination' or the ability to fancy, ponder or contemplate beyond the senses can in fact be beneficial to the soldier. Emotive language and unexpected associations are again used to state rather than infer how their spirit has been seared and now 'drags no pack'.
- Owen fuses the tangible 'cold' with the intangible 'old wounds' because having seen 'all things red' in battle, the prior pulsing of terror is gone. Their senses have been cauterised and sealed off to the extent that they 'can laugh among the dying, unconcerned.' This is an abhorrent image of callous indifference but Owen makes the reader reassess that these are men who have been so utterly brutalised by war that they cease to be men. What he pities is that they have lost part of their humanity and with feelings blunted, now exist in a state of mindlessness.
- The fourth stanza now deals with the happiest of all soldiers, those who are as yet still unacquainted with the horrors of the battlefield. They are blessed by naivety and an untrained mind, still happily ignorant of dawn attacks where 'many sighs are drained'. Such euphemisms stress the differences between expectation and reality.
- Negative terms, 'never trained' and 'not a notion' combine with the vague anonymity of 'somewhere' and 'some men'. The mid-stanza shift from 'they' to 'we' and the fact that Owen and his men 'march taciturn' rather than sing, stresses that there is no physical or emotional respite from interminable fear and despair but only one long darkness'. This lad can sing as he marches for he has not yet learnt that the march is long, dreary and unceasing, 'from larger day to huger night'. For a lad going through the routine of training at an upland camp, one day is much like another ('worth forgetting'. By contrast, Owen and his men in France 'march taciturn', it is not easy to forget and so silent rather than singing like the unschooled soldier, they trudge 'blood-shod' through the muddy sludge, like the soldiers did in 'Dulce et Decorum Est'.
- Visual imagery and metaphor combine to show veterans marching 'forlorn' and without hope because the 'dusk' and the 'huger night' they are moving inexorably towards is both a literal and a metaphorical representation of the darkness of death.

### Stanza V and VI

- Owen adopts a contemplative tone in the fifth stanza to contrast those who are 'wise' and still cognisant of what is going on with soldiers who are not 'sad, nor proud, /Nor curious at all'.
- All soldiers are besmirched by bloodshed, which blunts their ability to feel pity for others. Soldier poets are similarly handicapped but they must seek ways to reveal the brutal truth about war without being driven mad by its brutal ugliness.
- Owen uses three noun-clauses that are perfectly iambic in movement and shared rhyme to define the soldier's defensive lack of feeling as a coping mechanism for survival
- In stanza six Owen's use of para-rhyme evokes a stronger tone of anger and malice.
- He curses these 'dullards' who stand like stones before cannons.
- These armchair generals are deemed wretched and base because it was their choice to make themselves immune to feeling and pity.
- They have willingly dehumanised themselves and quenched their tears for they lack 'Whatever mourn's or 'Whatever shares/The eternal reciprocity of tears' which is the normal human response to suffering to which they have inured themselves.
- Owen laments how war diminishes humanity to the extent where it struggles to mourn for those who die or are unable to share 'the eternal reciprocity of tears'.