Bayonet Charge

SUMMARY

A soldier snaps to consciousness suddenly and realizes that he is in the midst of running somewhere. The unfinished seams of his khaki uniform rub painfully against his skin, and he is sweating profusely. He is clumsily heading over difficult terrain toward a green hedge that is lit up by rifle fire, and he can hear bullets punching through the air. His carries his heavy rifle with effort; it's like an extra arm with no feeling left. His eyes once welled up with patriotic tears, but now he just feels fiery sweat on his chest.

In his confusion, the soldier nearly stops. He suddenly wonders, what unfeeling, calculated forces—be they fate or politics—are governing his actions, as if he were nothing more than the hand of a clock? He runs like a man suspended in the dark, hoping to find an answer to his question in the act of running itself. Time seems to slow down, and his foot hangs in the air in the middle of his stride as if it were a statue.

Then bullets slash through the air and into the ground nearby, causing what looks like a yellow hare to run in frantic circles, its mouth is wide open but silent and its eyes bulging. The soldier pushes onward, pointing the blade affixed to the end of his rifle at the green hedge. Notions of patriotism, fighting for the King, human dignity, and other stuff like all fall away from the soldier, who can't afford to entertain such thoughts in the total chaos of battle. The air explodes with blue light all around the soldier as he reaches nervously for his dynamite.

THEMES

WAR AND PATRIOTISM

"Bayonet Charge" is set in the heat of a battle during which a soldier has a sudden change of heart. Whereas he had previously been motivated to fight by his patriotic commitment to his country, the chaos of the battlefield hits him with a dose of absurd reality: he realizes that war is inherently senseless, and the concepts that he previously held dear are ultimately hollow. Of course, it's now too late for him to do anything about this. The poem thus measures the visceral experience of actual conflict against the kind of romanticized fictions that might make people decide to go war in the first place.

The poem opens with the soldier making his "bayonet charge"—running at the enemy with the sharp knife on his gun pointed straight at them. Gunfire and artillery shells are going off all around, making war a very immediate and terrifying experience—contrasting with whatever romanticized notions the soldier might have had about war before going to battle. This idea is introduced from the very first line: "Suddenly he awoke and was running." The notion of waking up suggests that he is only now exiting a dream and entering reality. In other words, he's literally heading away from the illusory idea of war that he once believed to be true, and into the true terror of *actual* armed conflict.

The rest of the first stanza uses intense images and strained grammar to give the reader a sense of this dawning reality. The soldier is surrounded by "rifle fire" that seems to "smack the belly out of the air." His rifle is compared to the "numbness of a smashed arm," which is an entirely feasible injury in armed conflict. Because the soldier might die at any moment, patriotism is addressed head-on: it was a "tear that had brimmed in his eye" that is now "like molten iron [in] the centre of his chest." In other words, war has transformed from a somewhat emotional fantasy to a deadly reality, with the "molten iron" simile pre-empting the soldier's likely violent death.

As the soldier continues to run, he senses that he is just a metaphorical cog in a machine: "in what cold clock of the stars and the nations / was he the hand pointing that second?" The poem implies that he's nothing more than a tool of war, and that his urge to protect his country is not returned—his country won't protect *him* from the horrible reality he now finds himself in. He continues to "run" (to charge with his bayonet), but cannot hear "the reason / Of his still running." In other words, he is struck by how little his patriotism means to him now, suggesting that patriotism is a hollow concept in the first place.

Still acting automatically, he then thinks about "King, honour, human dignity, etcetera"—all of these drop away like "luxuries." This reveals that they were indulgences in the first place, concepts that ultimately have no bearing on the *reality* of war. Examining the list closely, it's notable that the third and fourth words don't normally belong wit the first two (which essentially express the old vow to die for King/Queen and country). Like allegiance to the King, "human dignity" is a distant unrelated concept because, put frankly, the soldier can't see any of it around him anymore. The "etcetera" is intentionally flippant, highlighting that this is a list of hollow words, no more meaningful to the soldier now than an old shopping list.

And that's where the poem ends, leaving the soldier deep in the horrific reality of war. He knows what he's *supposed* to do—use his "bayonet" and "dynamite"—but there's a distinct lack of other humans, friend or foe. Ultimately, the soldier is isolated by his epiphany, realizing that he is likely about to become nothing more than a statistic—one of the many lives wasted by war.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-23

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

Suddenly he awoke ...
... the air –

The poem opens *in media res*—in the middle of the action. The poem focuses on a single soldier who, as the title suggests, is in the middle of charging at the enemy with his bayonet (roughly setting the poem in the First World War). He is described as "suddenly" awake, which *could* mean that he had been sleeping during a lull in the battle. That's pretty unlikely, of course; this is probably a metaphorical way of saying that the soldier suddenly becomes acutely aware of the horror and chaos around him like never before. This sudden awakening also foreshadows the soldier's epiphany that comes later in the poem, in which it dawns on him that patriotism is a hollow concept that means little in *actual* war—that he has, in some way, been duped.

The soldier is "heavy" with sweat, and is described as "raw" (with that word repeated twice in quick succession). This relates to his physical exertion, but also to the intense fear that he feels as he enters the heat of battle. The intentionally awkward use of caesura and enjambment in the first two lines conveys the confusion and disorientating chaos of warfare:

> Suddenly he awoke and was running – raw
> In raw-seamed hot khaki, his sweat heavy,

Lines 3 and 4 intensify the sensory overload of the battlefield. The thick consonance in line 3 feels strained and cumbersome, evoking the difficult terrain over which the soldier makes his charge:

> Stumbling across a field of clods towards a green
> hedge

Rifle fire "dazzle[s]" the soldier's peripheral vision, building a sense of immediate threat. The poem uses an intentionally weird metaphor here as well, describing the gunfire as "smacking the belly out of the air." This metaphor doesn't quite seem to make sense—the air doesn't have anything like a belly; instead, this points to the intense force of the bullets as they fly past. The image, combined with the /b/ alliteration ("Bullets" and "belly"), is unquestionably violent, and suggests that the soldier is lucky for every additional moment he avoids being hit. The end-stop here, executed with an m-dash after the word "air," also looks like a blast of horizontal rifle fire and interrupts the flow of the poem.

LINES 6-8

He lugged a ...
... his chest, –

Line 6 picks up where the violent image of line 5 left off, comparing the soldier's rifle—the way it hangs like a dead weight on his side—to a "smashed arm." This is obviously a gruesome image, but it's all-the-more unsettling because it's *realistic*. That is, a "smashed arm" is the kind of injury that the soldier could easily obtain during battle. The humming /m/ consonance in "numb as a smashed arm" conveys that numbness.

Lines 7 and 8 mark a key shift in the poem, offering the first insight into the soldier's internal state. As with the image in line 5, this section is difficult to unpick, intentionally avoiding being too easy to understand. This difficulty reinforces the poem's atmosphere of confusion, fear, and the constantly changing situation in battle.

The soldier once cried a "patriotic tear"—he once believed in the honoring his country by going into battle, and was happy to sacrifice himself for what he saw as the greater good of his nation. But now, that tear that once "brimmed in his eye" instead "sweat[s] like molten iron from the centre of his chest." This simile is more about association than making sense—it's unclear if it means that the tear now sweats from his eye, or is talking about sweat on his chest. But that's not the point—the point is that the patriotic tear has been replaced by another violent and visceral image. The "molten iron" in the chest is like a horrible prediction of what might happen to the soldier if he gets struck down.

As with the end-stop at the end of line 5, the dash after "chest" in line 8 intentionally makes the poem feel abrupt—as though it too is darting around the battlefield. The dash also has the visual look of a bullet traveling a straight line through the air.

LINES 9-11

In bewilderment then ...
... pointing that second?

The second stanza is the crux of the poem. For the entirety of its seven lines, time seems to stand still. The soldier "almost" stops, suggesting that this is a moment of epiphany—but, of course, to *actually* stop would mean almost certain death, so he has to keep moving automatically.

But the absurdity of war undoubtedly dawns on him here, the "patriotic tear" no good to him now. That's why he is "bewilder[ed]"—the reality of war has stripped away the illusory ideals he once had. He senses that he is a mere cog in the vast machinery of war, and the realization very nearly stops him in his tracks. He feels that he has no control over his situation, with the poem likening his predicament to that of a clock hand

realizing that some other force is in charge. In this case, it's "the stars" (or fate) and "the nations"—those that hold the political power to make decisions about whether to go to war. This metaphorical and rhetorical question, of course, has no satisfactory answer because, the poem suggests, war is inherently senseless, absurd, and tragic.

The clear consonance in these lines mirrors the suddenness of the epiphany, while still conveying the violent atmosphere in which this epiphany takes place. Note the harsh /k/ and biting /st/ sounds in "almost," "stopped," "cold," "clockwork," "stars," and "second."

LINES 11-15

He was running ...
... Statuary in mid-stride.

After the rhetorical question in line 11 (the question mark is also a caesura), the poem develops an additional simile to describe the soldier's absurd situation. Almost like Wile E. Coyote running over the edge of a canyon, the soldier is suspended "in the dark." His reasons for going to war, which provided the foundation or ground of his decision, have disappeared, replaced by a horrible dose of reality. He keeps running, trying to find "between his footfalls ... the reason of his still running"—in other words, he hopes that simply the act of running will somehow reveal to him why he's doing this. But, of course, that reason never comes. The enjambment between lines 11-15 build a sense of pace or momentum, conveying via language the speaker's ongoing steps:

> ... running
> Like a man who has jumped up in the dark and runs
> Listening between his footfalls for the reason
> Of his still running, and his foot hung like
> Statuary ...

The repetition of "running" in this stanza further evokes the soldier's ongoing momentum, but also the way that this momentum doesn't have any "reason." It's also worth noting how "reason" alliterates with "running," ironically tying them together to indicate how the running has *no* real reason.

Within this simile comes another: "his foot hung like / Statuary in mid-stride." "Statuary" just means like a statue, the image highlighting the way that the soldier is moving in a physical sense but not in the sense of coming to an *understanding* of the purpose of war. This image of inaction—the foot like a statue—is also another grim prediction of the soldier's probable fate: the stillness of death. Finally, it's notable how, though there are presumably many others on the battlefield, the soldier seems completely alone, isolated both in his interior state and in his individual struggle to stay alive. Appropriately enough, the caesura in line 15 pauses the poem "mid-stride."

LINES 15-18

Then the shot-slashed ...
... eyes standing out.

After the caesura in line 15, which allowed time to momentarily stand still, the poem returns to the chaotic action of the battlefield. Bullets fly all around the soldier, striking the "furrows" (the trenches) in the ground. "Slot-slashed" alliterates clearly, drawing further attention to just how close these bullets are to the speaker and how violently they whip through the air.

The poem then deploys the next one of its unsettling and almost absurdist images. A shot hits the ground nearby and "thr[ows] up a yellow hare" (a hare is an animal that looks like a rabbit). It's hard to say if this is meant literally or not—if the bullets literally scare a hare out of the hedge—but it doesn't really matter. The ambiguity of whether this is a real hare or just a metaphorical image intensifies the chaotic confusion of the battlefield.

The poem then transforms this hare, real or not, through simile. The hare rolls "like a flame / And crawl[s] in a threshing circle, its mouth wide / Open silent, its eyes standing out." Everything about this picture is disturbing, from the maddening circles in which the hare spins, to the image of its "eyes standing out," or bulging out of its head in terror. The mention of a "threshing circle" gestures towards the fact that many of the battlefields in the First World War were agricultural areas (see Owen Sheers's "Mametz Wood" for a poem that addresses exactly that). The wide-open and "silent" mouth of the hare represents the way in which the soldier no longer understands his purpose—or, perhaps, understands that he has no purpose at all within the broader, senseless waste of war. The image of the mouth also conveys shock and disbelief, relating to the soldier's striking epiphany in the previous stanza. Indeed, the eyes also suggest a kind of bearing witness, the hare inadvertently observing the absurd horrors that humankind inflicts upon itself.

LINES 19-23

He plunged past ...
... terror's touchy dynamite.

The last five lines read like the last actions of the soldier. The reader isn't privy to whether the soldier survives or not, but it certainly seems unlikely. Regardless, bayonet thrust out in front of him, the soldier dives into "the green hedge" where the enemy presumably resides. Again, it's notable that there is no mention of other human beings anywhere in the poem. Instead, the focus is on the chaos and violent weaponry of warfare. The alliterating, spiky /p/ sounds of "plunged past," meanwhile, draw a picture of the soldier's pose, the sharp end of the bayonet pushed out partly in attack and partly as a desperate means of defense from whoever's in the hedge.

Line 20 is a key line in the poem, showing the soldier's newfound disillusionment:

> King, honour, human dignity, etcetera

Whereas once "King" and "honour" were his reasons for going to fight, they now seem meaningless—they're empty words that can't help the soldier in the chaos of war. To this list, the poem adds "human dignity"—implying that this, too, has ceased to be relevant. That is, such are the horrors of war that there is no dignity at all anymore. To underscore the irrelevance of these concepts, the poem essentially throws them away with the word "etcetera." All of these lofty ideals are now "luxuries" dropping to the floor; they're things the soldier can no longer afford to carry around in the chaos of battle.

That they drop "in a yelling alarm" suggests that this realization itself—that there is no "King, honor, human dignity, etcetera—is the call for the soldier to get out of there, to escape the "blue crackling air" filled with gunfire and explosions. In other words, the epiphany that he's not fighting for anything rings out like an alarm for the soldier to escape—though, of course, he can't.

The consonant /l/ sounds in this line and the next are prominent and loud, conveying the brutal noise of warfare:

> Dropped like luxuries in a yelling alarm
> To get out of that blue crackling air

The enjambment between line 22 and 23 also makes the meaning intentionally hard to follow. In addition to the interpretation above, it's also possible to read this as saying that another soldier is shouting at the poem's main character to try and get him to concentrate on the task at hand use his dynamite. But the dynamite also characterizes the explosive atmosphere in which the soldier finds himself. The poem ends by emphasizing the soldier's sheer panic, the alliteration and consonance in "His terror's touchy dynamite" suggesting that his nerves are fraught and jumpy with fear. And in this moment of intense drama, the poem abruptly ends—just like the soldier's life could well be about to do.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is a prominent device in "Bayonet Charge." Throughout the poem, groups of shared sounds are used to help the poem convey a violent atmosphere, the loudness of those sounds reflecting the noise and chaos of the battlefield.

In addition to the above effect, there's also something very claustrophobic about the way that /r/, /s/, /h/ sounds are used in the first three lines:

> Suddenly he awoke and was running – raw
> In raw-seamed hot khaki, his sweat heavy,
> Stumbling across a field of clods towards a green hedge

These sounds work hard to bring the image to life. First of all, their claustrophobic closeness suggests the way that, though the soldier is surrounded by other soldiers, he is a resolutely solitary figure. This sense of claustrophobia is bolstered by consonance as well as the assonance of /aw/ and /eh sounds throughout. The /s/ sounds (sibilance, technically) suggest a sense of hissing, taunting awareness, while the /r/ relates to the friction pain of his uniform as he runs. The /h/ sounds are breathy, conveying exhaustion.

Later, the /b/ sounds in line 5 ("Bullets" and "belly") come across as aggressive and violent, helping the reader to imagine the bullets flying all over the place.

The alliteration in lines 11-14 is also key, even though the alliterating words are quite far apart:

> ... He was running
> Like a man who has jumped up in the dark and runs
> Listening between his footfalls for the reason
> Of his still running ...

The enjambment makes these lines flow quickly, allowing the /r/ words to alliterate—the placement of the first three at the ends of their respective lines helps this too. It's important alliteration because it links the soldier's running action ironically to his sudden epiphany about the meaningless absurdity of war. He keeps *running*, even though he can't figure out the *reason* why.

The final significant example of alliteration is in the last line. Here, the two /t/ sounds in "terror's touchy dynamite" (which are also consonant with the /t/ in the poem's last word) have a jumpy, nervy sound. This helps the poem end on an unresolved note of fear, the reader kept in the dark about what happens next (but aware that the probable result of the "Bayonet Charge" is the soldier's death).

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Suddenly," "running," "raw"
- **Line 2:** "raw-seamed," "hot," "his," "sweat," "heavy"
- **Line 3:** "Stumbling," "hedge"
- **Line 5:** "Bullets," "belly"
- **Line 9:** "stopped"
- **Line 10:** "cold clockwork," "stars"
- **Line 11:** "second," "running"
- **Line 12:** "runs"
- **Line 13:** "reason"
- **Line 14:** "still," "running," "his," "hung"
- **Line 15:** "Statuary," "Then the shot-slashed"

- **Line 18:** "silent," "standing"
- **Line 19:** "plunged past," "hedge"
- **Line 20:** "honour, human"
- **Line 21:** "like luxuries"
- **Line 23:** "terror's touchy"

ASSONANCE

Assonance is used throughout "Bayonet Charge." In the first three lines, this assonance—combined with intense alliteration and consonance—gives the lines a claustrophobic feel. Note the frequency of the long /ee/, /aw/, and /uh/ sounds here, which give the poem's opening a frantic intensity that mimic's the soldier's confused running:

> Suddenly he awoke and was running – raw
> In raw-seamed hot khaki, his sweat heavy,
> Stumbling across a field of clods towards a green
> hedge

These sounds also seem to weigh down the poem's sound, suggesting the soldier's physical exhaustion. The assonance in "sweat heavy" in particular makes the phrase *itself* heavy.

The end of this first stanza is also filled with assonance, closing the first chunk of the poem on a rhetorical high. Note the insistence on the long and short /i/ vowels, as well as the long and short /e/ vowels:

> The patriotic tear that had brimmed in his eye
> Sweating like molten iron from the centre of his
> chest, –

Nearly *every* word of these lines is assonant with another, and this intensity of sound reflects the building intensity of the chaos that surrounds the soldier.

Assonance is also to link various words together thematically. Take the long /oh/ and the /aw/ sounds in lines 9 and 10, with the phrases "almost stopped" and "cold clockwork." Both phrases have to do with time, and together emphasize the soldier's newfound awareness that he is just a cog in the machinery of war, moving forward not really on his own accord.

Another striking moment of assonance comes with the long /i/ sound in lines 17 and 18:

> ... its mouth wide
> Open silent, its eyes standing out.

This sound is long, drawn out; it pushes the reader to linger over these words and the horrific imagery being described, of this animal essentially silently screaming and staring in terror at the surrounding carnage of war.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Suddenly he," "was running ," "raw"
- **Line 2:** "raw-seamed hot khaki," "sweat heavy"
- **Line 3:** "Stumbling across a field of clods towards a green hedge"
- **Line 4:** "rifle fire"
- **Line 6:** "lugged," "numb," "as," "smashed"
- **Lines 7-8:** "patriotic tear that had / eye / Sweating like molten iron"
- **Line 7:** "brimmed in his"
- **Line 8:** "centre," "chest"
- **Line 9:** "bewilderment then," "almost stopped"
- **Line 10:** "cold clockwork"
- **Line 11:** "running"
- **Line 12:** "jumped up," "runs"
- **Line 13:** "between," "reason"
- **Line 14:** "his still running," "hung"
- **Line 15:** " furrows"
- **Line 16:** "Threw," "yellow"
- **Line 17:** "wide"
- **Line 18:** "silent," "eyes"
- **Line 20:** "honour"
- **Line 21:** "Dropped"
- **Line 22:** "that," "crackling"

CAESURA

Caesura is used throughout "Bayonet Charge." It works closely with enjambment and end-stopping to create abrupt turns in the poem, building a sense of jerky, unpredictable panic throughout.

The first caesura comes before the last word of the first line:

> Suddenly he awoke and was running – raw

The dash here is an abrupt interruption. Throughout the poem, there is a tension between the soldier's running motion (often conveyed through enjambment) and the danger coming at him from all angles. The dash, too, can be seen as a visual symbol of gunfire—the way that bullets travel in a straight line.

Another next key caesura is in line 11 (quoted with line 10 for context):

> In what cold clockwork of the stars and the nations
> Was he the hand pointing that second? He was
> running

This is a key moment in the poem in which the soldier has a sudden—and horrible—epiphany. Time seems to slow down as he realizes that his reasons for going to war, largely based on patriotism, are meaningless now. The question mark caesura highlights the soldier's sudden desire for a better answer as to

why he's running to a near-certain death, but also highlights that there is no answer to come. The brief pause afforded by the caesura lets this sink in.

Line 15's caesura is also quite evocative:

> Statuary in mid-stride. Then the shot-slashed
> furrows

It literally *stops* the line in the middle, mimicking the description of the soldier's foot as hanging "in mid-stride."

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "running – raw"
- **Line 2:** "khaki, his"
- **Line 4:** "fire, hearing"
- **Line 11:** "second? He"
- **Line 14:** "running, and"
- **Line 15:** "mid-stride. Then"
- **Line 17:** "circle, its"
- **Line 18:** "silent, its"
- **Line 20:** "King, honour, human dignity, etcetera"

CONSONANCE

"Bayonet Charge" is full of consonance. Much of this is alliteration, which is covered in that section of this guide.

In its opening lines, the poem employs dense consonance as a way of conveying the difficulty of the terrain over which the soldier is running:

> Suddenly he awoke and was running – raw
> In raw-seamed hot khaki, his sweat heavy,
> Stumbling across a field of clods towards a green
> hedge

Consonants like /r/, /w/, /h/, /k/, and /d/ are particularly cumbersome when piled up like this, and take a bit of an effort when spoken out loud. They thus help conjure a picture of the soldier's physical struggles as he charges forward.

The next key example is in line 6:

> He lugged a rifle numb as a smashed arm;

These soft /l/ and humming /m/ sounds convey numbness, representing the way the soldier's rifle feels like a dead weight.

In line 10, consonance is a key part of one of the poem's most important phrases: "cold clockwork." It's at this moment that soldier realizes—tragically too late—that he is just a cog in the vast machinery of war. The hard /k/ sounds are distributed through the phrase like the ticking of a clock.

Following the soldier's epiphany about the absurd nature of war—in which time seems to stand still—soft /n/ consonance, which forces the tongue to linger on the roof of the mouth when spoken out loud, in lines 11 to 14 emphasizes this weird stillness (before returning to harsher sounds after line 15's caesura):

> Was he the hand pointing that second? He was
> running
> Like a man who has jumped up in the dark and runs
> Listening between his footfalls for the reason
> Of his still running ...

The consonance in the last stanza is much harsher, evoking the brutal noise of the surrounding battlefield. Of particular note are the phrase "blue crackling air" and the nervous-sounding /t/ consonants in the last line: "terror's touchy dynamite."

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- 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
- Lines 21-23

END-STOPPED LINE

End-stop is used fairly frequently throughout "Bayonet Charge." It works closely with enjambment and caesura to create an atmosphere of tension and frantic chaos to match the poem's battlefield setting.

The end-stops at the ends of line 5 ("Bullets smacking the belly out of the air –") and line 8 ("Sweating like molten iron from the centre of his chest, –") both work similarly. Each is an interruption, conveying the sensory overload of conflict—as though reflecting the soldier's difficulty in paying attention to all the different threats surrounding him. The use of a dash is important too; as a horizontal line, the dash represents bullet-fire and the way it travels in one straight direction.

The end-stop at the end of line 6, by contrast, helps to emphasize the description of the soldier's rifle being "numb as a smashed arm[.]" The pause created by the semi-colon at the

end of the line allows the image to linger ("He lugged a rifle numb as a smashed arm;"). The end-stop in line 9 ("In bewilderment then he almost stopped –") also evokes gunfire, but serves another function too. Coming after the words "he almost stopped," this end-stop is the entry point into the soldier's epiphany—the point at which he realizes patriotism is a lie. The end-stop grants a moment of pause as the speaker formulates this question in his mind.

Another end-stop in the poem appears at the end of line 18 ("Open silent, its eyes standing out."). This full stop—one of just a handful in the poem—gives dramatic weight to the gruesome image of a "yellow hare," open-mouthed, with its "eyes standing out." The pause allows this graphic image to settle, and creates a momentary silence to match the description of the hare as "silent."

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "heavy,"
- **Line 5:** "air –"
- **Line 6:** "arm;"
- **Line 8:** "chest, –"
- **Line 9:** "stopped –"
- **Line 18:** "out."
- **Line 19:** "hedge,"
- **Line 23:** "dynamite."

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is used frequently in "Bayonet Charge." Overall, it works closely with the poem's caesuras and end-stops to conjure the frantic and frightening atmosphere of a battle-field. The start and end points of the poem's phrases are unpredictable, just like armed conflict itself is, essentially, chaos.

The first enjambment is between the first two lines of the poem, coming immediately after a caesura:

> Suddenly he awoke and was running – raw
> In raw-seamed hot khaki, his sweat heavy,

This creates a fragment—the word "raw" on its own—which needs the following to complete it. Immediately, then, this builds tension, the poem refusing to unfold in a neat and orderly way. The same effect is used between line 4 and line 5, the poem ending on the word "hearing":

> That dazzled with rifle fire, hearing
> Bullets smacking ...

This again creates a moment of anticipation and tension, and makes the next two words—"Bullets smacking"—pack a dramatic and weighty punch.

In the second stanza, every single line except for the first line is enjambed (including the line that leads to the third stanza!). The lines topple continuously down the page. This represents the soldier's continuous running *motion*, while the content actually contained within these lines shows him questioning why he is running in the first place. The final stanza also uses frequent enjambment, doubling down on the sense of panic and confusion as sentences break in unexpected places.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "raw / In"
- **Lines 3-4:** "hedge / That "
- **Lines 4-5:** "hearing / Bullets"
- **Lines 7-8:** "eye / Sweating "
- **Lines 10-11:** "nations / Was"
- **Lines 11-12:** "running / Like"
- **Lines 12-13:** "runs / Listening"
- **Lines 13-14:** "reason / Of"
- **Lines 14-15:** "like / Statuary"
- **Lines 15-16:** "furrows / Threw"
- **Lines 16-17:** "flame / And"
- **Lines 17-18:** "wide / Open"
- **Lines 20-21:** "etcetera / Dropped"
- **Lines 21-22:** "alarm / To"
- **Lines 22-23:** "air / His"

METAPHOR

"Bayonet Charge" uses two key metaphors. The first of these is in line 5, quoted with lines 3 and 4 for context:

> Stumbling across a field of clods towards a green
> hedge
> That dazzled with rifle fire, hearing
> Bullets smacking the belly out of the air –

This describes the bullets that surround the soldier as he runs. It's an obviously violent image, which also creates a sense of the visceral intensity of warfare. The phrase "smacking the belly" evokes punching someone in the gut, or knocking the wind out of them; the phrase is meant to convey the force and speed of the bullets. At the same time, it's a rather disorientating and strange metaphor, given that the air doesn't have anything like a "belly." It's as though the soldier, running in his heightened state of panic, doesn't have time to fully figure out the way that he perceives his surroundings—that's why the air has a "belly."

The other metaphor comes in lines 10 and 11:

> In what cold clockwork of the stars and the nations
> Was he the hand pointing that second?

This is part of the soldier's epiphany in which he realizes he is just a small cog in the vast machinery of war. Think of it this

way: "clockwork" suggests tightly-controlled machinery. That this "clockwork" is "cold" underscores how unfeeling it is; it doesn't actually care about the soldier—who, meanwhile, is nothing more than the second hand, ticking along just as the clock's winding gears tell him to. The "cold[ness]" of the clockwork also relates to the inhumanity of warfare, something the soldier only understands now that he has come face to face with the brutality of armed conflict.

This metaphor plays with an idea of agency—that is, it asks who is controlling the soldier as he makes his almost automatic run towards the enemy. "The nations" suggests that political power holds the keys to war, with the mention of "the stars" perhaps suggesting the inevitability of the soldier's death—the way it seems fated to happen (but only because he's in the middle of an armed conflict). They could also reference faith and belief, given that "stars" are often symbolically associated with the heavens. In this reading, the soldier is rushing towards his death because of a war waged on behalf of other people's beliefs.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Bullets smacking the belly out of the air"
- **Lines 10-11:** "In what cold clockwork of the stars and the nations / Was he the hand pointing that second?"

REPETITION

There are two main examples of repetition in "Bayonet Charge," and they both make an important contribution to the poem.

The first example is the two repeated "raw[s]" in lines 1 and 2:

> Suddenly he awoke and was running – raw
> In raw-seamed hot khaki, his sweat heavy,

"Raw" is associated with the soldier's physical pain, so the diacope here just emphasizes that his body is sore—not only because he's been running, but because the seams of his uniform are rubbing against his skin.

The main repetition in the poem, however, is with the word "running." This word, or a variant of it, occurs in line 1, line 11, line 12, and line 14. The word literally *runs* throughout the poem—that is, until the soldier finally makes it to the "green hedge" and, in all likelihood, his death.

The repetition of the word foregrounds the way the soldier's ongoing, almost automatic motion. He is running as he is meant to do, but, as the second stanza makes clear, he's no longer sure *why* he's willing to sacrifice himself on behalf of this war. With old ideals of patriotism and honor now feeling like hollow concepts, the soldier's running takes on the air of absurd desperation.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "raw"
- **Line 2:** "raw"
- **Line 3:** "green hedge"
- **Line 4:** "rifle"
- **Line 6:** "rifle"
- **Line 11:** "running"
- **Line 12:** "runs"
- **Line 14:** "running"
- **Line 19:** "green hedge"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

"Bayonet Charge" has one rhetorical question, which takes place almost exactly halfway through the poem:

> In what cold clockwork of the stars and the nations
> Was he the hand pointing that second?

Before discussing the meaning of this question, it's important to acknowledge its placement in the poem. Literally and metaphorically, it is the heart of the poem, showing that at the center of the soldier's wartime experience is a deep and harrowing uncertainty. Of course, this dawns on him far too late—he's already "charg[ing]" at the enemy and the near certainty of death.

This question is a kind of epiphany, the soldier's sudden realization that the patriotism that once motivated him really means nothing. In other words, it's a big and brutal dose of reality, with the soldier realizing here that he is just a mere cog in some vast and horrible machine of war. Presenting this as a kind of clockwork speaks to the tension between action and inaction. That is, the soldier senses that there is no good reason for him to be doing what he's doing—logically speaking, he should stop—but he can't, pushed forward automatically like the hand of a clock.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-11:** "In what cold clockwork of the stars and the nations / Was he the hand pointing that second?"

SIMILE

Simile is an important part of "Bayonet Charge." It is first used in line 6: "He lugged a rifle numb as a smashed arm." Technically this is also a comparison of two types of numbness, so some might not interpret it as a simile at all. The rifle feels like a dead weight to the soldier, and the simile introduces a grim realism to this image. That is, "a smashed arm" is a totally feasible injury that might befall the soldier in war.

The next simile is in lines 7 and 8:

> The patriotic tear that had brimmed in his eye
> Sweating like molten iron from the centre of his
> chest, –

This is a strange simile, and is difficult to follow—but that actually supports the chaos and confusion in the atmosphere in the poem. The tear that the soldier once cried out of love for his country now sweats from him "like molten iron from the centre of his chest." As with the previous simile, this seems to anticipate a potential war wound, emphasizing the danger faced by the soldier in his current situation.

The second stanza also has two similes, starting in line 11):

> ... He was running
> Like a man who has jumped up in the dark and runs
> Listening between his footfalls for the reason
> Of his still running, and his foot hung like
> Statuary in mid-stride.

This is another surreal moment. Though the soldier is running, the simile here presents a kind of stillness. That's because the soldier has just had a moment of clarity, suddenly understanding the absurdity and wastefulness of war. He is "in the dark" because he doesn't have the light of an answer to his question as to *why* he is doing this. The simile then unfolds into *another* simile, describing the soldier's foot as being like a statue. Again, this speaks to the way that time seems to stand still during the soldier's epiphany.

The next simile comes in a deeply unsettling image at the start of the final stanza which describes a "yellow hare that rolled like a flame." Again, it's difficult to tell what's real here. It could be an actual hare, though they aren't usually yellow! The comparison to a flame, though, once again borrows on the reality of war—they're probably *are* flames all around the soldier.

The final simile mixes abstract nouns with something concrete:

> King, honour, human dignity, etcetera
> Dropped like luxuries in a yelling alarm

This simile is used to highlights how "King, honour, [and] human dignity" seem like distant concepts from the soldier's actual war-time experience. Though they once held importance, now they seem like "luxuries"—frivolous items that can't help the soldier actually stay alive.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "He lugged a rifle numb as a smashed arm"
- **Lines 7-8:** "The patriotic tear that had brimmed in his eye / Sweating like molten iron from the centre of his chest,"
- **Lines 11-15:** "He was running / Like a man who has jumped up in the dark and runs / Listening between his footfalls for the reason / Of his still running, and his foot hung like / Statuary in mid-stride."
- **Lines 15-16:** "Then the shot-slashed furrows / Threw up a yellow hare that rolled like a flame"
- **Lines 20-21:** "King, honour, human dignity, etcetera / Dropped like luxuries in a yelling alarm"

VOCABULARY

Raw-seamed (Line 2) - The seams of the soldier's uniform are rubbing against his skin as he runs, making it sore.

Khaki (Line 2) - A brownish yellow material often used for army uniforms.

Clods (Line 3) - Clumps of earth.

Lugged (Line 6) - Carried with difficulty.

Bewilderment (Line 9) - Confusion/bafflement.

Footfalls (Line 13) - The sound of footsteps.

Statuary (Line 15) - This means the soldier's foot is like a statue—frozen in motion.

Furrows (Line 15) - Dug-up sections of the earth.

Threshing circle (Line 17) - Threshing is the process of loosening the edible part of a grain from the chaff. A traditional method for threshing was to have donkeys or oxen walk in a circle, stomping over the grains as they went. Basically, the line means that the hare is flailing about in a circle.

Bayonet (Line 19) - A knife or spear that fits on the end of a gun.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Though it might look like it on first glance, "Bayonet Charge" doesn't have a strict poetic form. The first and last stanzas are octets, meaning they have eight lines, and the middle stanza is a septet, meaning it has just seven.

Though not really part of a specific form, note how the poem opens up right in the middle of the action—the first line thrusting the reader into the middle of the battlefield. This starts things off on a chaotic, confusing note.

The other important thing to notice is the way that the middle stanza differs from the first and last. While the first and last are primarily full of action, in the second stanza time seems to stand still. This is the crux of the poem, the moment in which the soldier has an epiphany (which is unfortunately way too late for him). He "almost stop[s]," suddenly seeing with painful

clarity the absurdity and senselessness of war.

And then, just as the reader is plunged right into the action by the poem's abrupt opening line, they are pulled violently out of the poem at the end. The soldier makes it to the target—"the green hedge"—but whether he survives or not is left up to the reader's imagination.

METER

"Bayonet Charge" does not use a strict metrical scheme, with the amount of stressed and unstressed syllables in each line varying throughout the poem. Instead, it's a free verse poem. Broadly speaking, this keeps the poem feeling unpredictable and chaotic—much like the battle it describes.

That isn't to say that there aren't some metrical effects here and there, though. Look at the way that "Stumbling" at the start of line 3—which starts the line with an unavoidable stress—seems to evoke the action of stumbling, conveying the soldier's difficulty with the battlefield terrain. Similarly, stresses at the start of line 5 have a powerful effect—"Bullets smacking"—creating a violent and harsh sound.

The meter in the last line has an interesting effect:

> His terror's touchy dynamite.

The stresses here are actually in an iambic pattern—da DUM da DUM da DUM. This creates the sense that the soldier is juggling the dynamite from hand to hand—from stressed to unstressed syllable—unsure of what he's supposed to do. The meter here helps the poem end on a cliffhanger, leaving the reader to guess what happens next.

RHYME SCHEME

"Bayonet Charge" doesn't really use rhyme. It's written in free verse, without a set rhyme scheme or meter. Broadly speaking, this adds to the poem's sense of instability and unpredictability—which is very fitting for a poem set on a battlefield. Having a neat and tidy rhyme scheme would work against the poem's atmosphere of chaos, frantic confusion, and threat. That is, it would be far too much order in a discussion of what is ultimately a very disordered situation!

SPEAKER

"Bayonet Charge" focuses on one character only—the soldier making that charge. Readers are never told who this soldier is fighting for, however, nor who his enemy is. This helps the poem's critique of war become more universal; the poem isn't condemning a certain side, but the act of war itself.

The poem is told entirely in the third person, with no attempt to clarify or identify the *speaker* themselves. Yet, at the same time, the poem does have privileged access to the *soldier's* thoughts and feelings. Indeed, the poem's main focus is on the change of heart the soldier undergoes as he rushes towards the enemy, the complete switch in the way that he views war.

The detachment of the poem's voice versus its intimate knowledge of the details of the soldier's mind creates a sense of tension in the poem, making the soldier seem like a distant figure. This adds to the sense that the soldier, though surrounded by other soldiers, is utterly alone—particularly in the cold light of his epiphany about the absurdity of war. Another way of looking at it is that there is a parallel between the way that the soldier suddenly feels himself to be a cog in the machinery of war (see the second stanza) and the way that the poem observes him from a distance—he is powerless over both the war and his role in the poem.

SETTING

The poem is set in the heat of battle—*where*, exactly, is unclear. This is intentional: readers don't know who this soldier is fighting for, which "nations" he serves on behalf of. Though it's arguably Britain given that Hughes himself was British and Britain indeed has a "King," this isn't definite. This helps the poem's message about war remain more universal.

That said, the mention of bayonets and rifles, combined with this poem's relationship with other poems in Hughes's first collection, mean it's fair to read this as a poem about World War I (though it doesn't say explicitly). Hughes didn't serve in either of the 20th century's great wars (he was too young), but his father fought in the First World War.

In any case, the poem evokes the horror of battle in general. It begins *in media res*—in the middle of the action—and, indeed, it ends there too. The poem builds a sense of a chaotic, frightening, and frenetic environment. But just as it is set on the battlefield, it's also set within the soldier's psyche. Indeed, it's within the soldier's innermost thoughts that the most important part of the poem takes place—his epiphany (in stanza two), in which he suddenly sees, too clearly and too late, the absurdity of the war in which he is likely to meet his death.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Ted Hughes was one of the most significant British poets of the 20th century. He grew up in West Riding, Yorkshire, a relatively rural part of England, cultivating an early interest in the natural world and often hunting and fishing.

"Bayonet Charge" is one of a number of poems in Hughes's first collection that focus on the First World War. Hughes's father served in this conflict, and Hughes himself grew up during World War II (though was too young to fight). Though he wasn't

a war poet, the experiences of war were thus still close at hand. Indeed, one academic, Dennis Walder, describes Hughes as a "war poet at one remove, writing out of the impact of memory—the individual memory of his father, and the collective memory of English culture."

This places this side of Hughes's poetry in a kind of alternative tradition: war poetry drawn not from direct combat experience, but rather from the post-war cultural atmosphere and perhaps—in Hughes's case at least—childhood memories of the war years. The two world wars were, of course, two of the most cataclysmic events in human history—and so it follows that poetry would try to make sense of them in the years after, even if it was primarily to foreground war's senselessness. Significant poems in this loosely defined alternative tradition, then, could be "The Lost Pilot" by James Tate, "Znamenskaya Square, Leningrad, 1941" by Sharon Olds, and "The Hiroshima Horse" by Jack Barrack, to name a few.

There is, of course, a rich collection of war poetry written by those who actually fought as well, such as the works of Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen ("Dulce et Decorum Est," "Anthem for Doomed Youth," "Futility"), and Robert Graves. Owen, who served and died in WWI, is especially famous for his critical stance on the war. Like Hughes's poem, Owen's work presented war as futile, wasteful, and horrific. On the other side of the Atlantic, American poets Randall Jarrell and Karl Shapiro also made a key contribution to the war poetry genre.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The historical context of this poem is the First World War. Though it isn't stated explicitly, the khaki, bayonet, rifles, and nature of combat—trench warfare—make this setting clear. The poem is also part of a group of poems in Hughes's first collection on the same subject. At the time, this war was described with the term "the war to end all wars"—a phrase that of course turned out to be tragically inaccurate with the onset of World War II. Around 16 million people died directly in WWI, with many more perishing in the great flu outbreaks and conflicts that followed.

Life in the trenches of Europe during the war was terrifying and deadly, and the poor conditions caused frequent sickness and disease. Soldiers were often delirious with sleep deprivation—perhaps referenced in the first line here—and the nature of combat was chaotic and confusing. The soldier's epiphany in this poem—in which he suddenly seems to perceive the absurdity of war and the hollowness of patriotism—subtly mirrors the shift in public mood during the war from nervous excitement in the beginning to battle-weary depression by the end.

This poem was first published in the late 1950s. The specter of the two world wars still loomed large over the world, but a booming economy in America and a rebuilding Europe began to make the world feel like it was moving on from its self-inflicted 20th century horrors. Tensions between the U.S.A. and the Soviet Union, however, rose during the '50s. Ultimately, the world found itself on the brink of an all-out nuclear war—which most likely would have surpassed the destruction and devastation of both world wars combined.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Plath and Hughes Interviewed — A fascinating discussion with Ted Hughes and the American poet (and Hughes's wife) Sylvia Plath. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vqhsnk6vY8E)
- A Documentary about Hughes — A BBC show about Hughes's life and work. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XbAGbjXPCP8)
- Ted Hughes and War — An interesting article about Ted Hughes's war poems. (https://www.bl.uk/people/ted-hughes)
- Ted Hughes at the British Library — More resources and a biography of Hughes, from the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/people/ted-hughes)
- The Bayonet — An insightful look at the history of the bayonet and its role in warfare. (http://theconversation.com/friday-essay-a-short-sharp-history-of-the-bayonet-126010)
- Hughes's Life and Work — Resources from the Poetry Foundation on More Poems and Biography (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/ted-hughes)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER TED HUGHES POEMS

- Hawk Roosting

HOW TO CITE

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