1914

POEM TEXT

War broke: and now the Winter of the world
With perishing great darkness closes in.
The foul tornado, centred at Berlin,
Is over all the width of Europe whirled,
Rending the sails of progress. Rent or furled
Are all Art's ensigns. Verse wails. Now begin
Famines of thought and feeling. Love's wine's thin.
The grain of human Autumn rots, down-hurled.

For after Spring had bloomed in early Greece,
And Summer blazed her glory out with Rome,
An Autumn softly fell, a harvest home,
A slow grand age, and rich with all increase.
But now, for us, wild Winter, and the need
Of sowings for new Spring, and blood for seed.

SUMMARY

The speaker compares the outbreak of war to a vast winter—a season of cold, deadly darkness closing in across the world. The war is like a terrible cyclone that began in Berlin and has now spun across the whole of Europe, ripping down the sails of progress along the way. Art's flags are all torn or rolled up, and poetry cries out in despair. There's an extreme shortage of critical thinking and empathy. Love is weak. The fruits of human civilization are rotting, having been tossed to the ground.

Comparing human progress to the seasons, the speaker deems ancient Greece to have been the springtime of human history. Ancient Rome was then summer, a time when civilization quickly grew and spread in a blaze of glory. Then autumn, the harvest season, quietly set in. This season of humanity was an era filled with slow yet abundant growth and prosperity. But in the present, all that's left is the savage winter season. Civilization needs to sow seeds if it is to be renewed, to enter a new spring, and all there is to plant is the blood of the fallen.

THEMES

THE TOTAL DESTRUCTION OF WAR

"1914" is a sonnet about the outbreak of World War I. In an extended metaphor, the poem compares this war to the "Winter of the world," a time of death, destruction, and the collapse of Western civilization itself. War, in this poem, is like a natural disaster that indiscriminately destroys everything in its path—including human progress.

The speaker begins by declaring that the beginning of World War I has plunged the world (especially Europe, the heart of Western civilization and the main battleground of WWI) into a terrible "Winter." This winter represents not only the physical costs of war (such as the destruction of buildings and people) but also the loss of the very things that define society and make life worth living: art, thought, morals, culture, and love.

The destruction of those things has left society (especially Europe) in a kind of spiritual wasteland, the speaker argues. The "foul tornado" of the war rips society's "sails of progress," while "Art's ensigns" (the flags, banners, and emblems of art, which the poem sees as the spiritual opposite of war) are all torn or rolled up. Likewise, poetry "wails," and people suffer "[f]amines" of "thought and feeling," not just of food. The wine of love—the affection that bonds people together in a peaceful, prosperous society—is "thin." This war, the speaker thus makes clear, is about more than bombed cities and lost lives; it's about the loss of ideals, morals, and virtues that have made centuries of human "progress" possible.

In fact, the poem suggests that war doesn't just destroy human progress; it's also a direct *result* of people not sufficiently valuing the benefits of a peaceful, stable, prosperous society. In other words, war doesn't just come out of nowhere. The conditions for war have been created because the "grain of human Autumn"—the rich harvest of enlightened human society—has been recklessly thrown to the ground, where it "rots." Likewise, the primal impulses suggested by the symbolism of the "foul tornado" have begun to win people over—and not just the actual aggressors in the war. War breaks out and civilization collapses, the poem suggests, because people do not sufficiently value the benefits and rewards of peaceful human society.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8
- Lines 13-14

SOCIETAL COLLAPSE, RENEWAL, AND SACRIFICE

The poem sees WWI as part of a long cycle of societal growth, collapse, and, possibly, renewal. The speaker specifically compares the growth and decline of civilization to the progression of the seasons: the seeds of civilization bloom

in spring, grow through summer, fully ripen in autumn, and die off in winter.

Here, that winter season represents World War I, which spreads icy darkness across Europe. And because winter is followed by spring, the poem's extended metaphor might suggest that civilization will be renewed after this conflict—that the war will pave the way for a kind of rebirth, essentially paid for with soldiers' "blood." At the same time, the poem implicitly questions whether this "blood" can really be the "seed" that humanity needs to enter a new "spring"—that is, whether the horror and violence of war can possibly usher in an age of prosperity and growth.

The speaker views ancient Greece—the birthplace of democracy—as the "Spring" of modern civilization, the time and place where the foundation of modern Europe was first established. "Summer" then represents ancient Rome, the great empire that spread civilization widely across the globe. Even though Rome eventually collapsed, the speaker sees modern civilization as having sprung from its ashes. The fall of Rome gave way to a long, prosperous "Autumn" (a "slow grand age") during which human society gradually improved. Civilization here is like a crop ripening for the harvest.

The world is now at the end of this cycle, the speaker says: society has collapsed with the outbreak of war, and now humanity is in its "wild Winter"—a time of death and destruction. And yet, winter is *also* a time of anticipation for the coming spring. Spring follows winter, and in this way the poem suggests that a *renewal* of civilization may follow its destruction by war.

If there's a chance that the cycle of human progress can begin again, people will need to plant seeds that will blossom into a "new Spring." However, the world has only "blood for seed." In this striking image, the blood of those killed in the war (which soaks the ground of much of Europe) becomes the seed that may prompt another spring season and a new, blossoming era of civilization.

Of course, blood is emphatically *not* seed; it's very possible, the poem suggests, that the "new Spring" the world needs will never come. The things that normally lead to society's growth and "progress"—art, thought, feeling, and love—have been destroyed, cast down, and forgotten and left to "rot." The blood of those killed in the Great War may or may not be a sufficient substitute for those things, but it is all the world has left. In the end, then, the poem leaves open the possibility of humankind's redemption through the trauma of war, but the speaker remains seriously disturbed by the great cost of the sacrifice.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 9-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

War broke: and now the Winter of the world
With perishing great darkness closes in.

"1914" begins suddenly, with a stark declaration: "War broke." The title indicates the specific war in question: World War I, which began in mid-1914 following the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand of Austria.

But "1914" doesn't get into too many historical details about the war. Rather, the unidentified speaker (who seems to be speaking during the year 1914, sometime shortly after the outbreak of war) is concerned with the war's general destructiveness and horror. In a striking metaphor, the speaker compares the war to the "Winter of the world," a human season of cold, death, and destruction that "closes in" threateningly on the poem's present. These first two lines present the war as a brutal, unavoidable fact. Now that war has begun (no matter how it began), it seems inevitable that the situation will get worse before it gets better, if it gets better at all.

The poem's beginning is all the more striking thanks to several poetic devices. Just listen to all the repeated sounds in these first two lines:

War broke: and now the Winter of the world
With perishing great darkness closes in.

Alliteration and consonance give the lines an intense, dramatic effect. Assertive, punchy stresses on "War broke" and "great darkness" reflect the destructive, violent force the lines describe. And the colon after the poem's first two words creates a dramatic division in the first line, called a caesura, which *breaks* the line itself in two. War "broke" out (in the sense that it began), but it also "broke" this line of poetry, just as it destroys human lives and uproots whole societies. The full extent of war's destruction—as well as the possibility for repairing the damage—will be the central preoccupations of the rest of the poem.

LINES 3-5

The foul tornado, centred at Berlin,
Is over all the width of Europe whirled,
Rending the sails of progress.

The speaker uses another metaphor, now comparing the forces that caused the war to a "foul tornado" that has been thrown all over Europe. This nasty cyclone refers to the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire), the first aggressors in World War I and the opponents of the Allies (which included England, France, and many others). The speaker says the tornado is "centred at Berlin" because Germany, led by Kaiser Wilhelm II, was the most important of

the Central Powers.

The "foul tornado" has another layer of meaning. Beyond referring to the actual nations that caused the war, the metaphor also evokes the broader, more elemental forces that have taken over those nations and led people to the desperate measure of global war. The speaker doesn't specify what these impulses are, though later in the stanza, they are contrasted with art, thought, feeling, and love.

Every human instinct contrary to those things could be a part of the "foul tornado" that is overtaking Europe and threatening the whole of civilization, ripping the "sails of progress." In this additional metaphor, human progress is like a ship whose sails are tangled and torn by the "tornado" of war.

The alliteration in line 4 ("width" and "whirled") emphasizes the existential scope of the threat the "foul tornado" poses: it swirls across the "width of Europe." Lines 3 and 4 are also good examples of iambic pentameter, the basic meter of the poem:

> The foul | tornad- | o, cent- | red at | Berlin,
> Is ov- | er all | the width | of Eur- | ope whirled,

Although many lines (such as lines 1 and 2) use more flexible variations of this meter, lines 3 and 4 contain five feet that follow a perfect unstressed-stressed syllable pattern. This is the typical meter of an Italian sonnet, of which "1914" is a good modern example.

LINES 5-8

> *Rent or furled*
> *Are all Art's ensigns. Verse wails. Now begin*
> *Famines of thought and feeling. Love's wine's thin.*
> *The grain of human Autumn rots, down-hurled.*

After establishing the grave threat that war poses to Europe and human "progress," the speaker makes a long list of the effects of war. The poem doesn't focus on war's impact on individual people (though many of Owen's other famous poems do just that) but on war's destruction of society at large.

"Art's ensigns," or identifying flags and banners, have been ripped apart or "furled" (rolled up) so that they can't be seen. The point of this metaphor is that art (including the visual arts, music, literature, and beyond) has lost its place of importance in society; even art can't survive in the face of such a devastating global war.

Likewise, verse (another word for poetry, especially poetry that follows a regular meter or rhyme scheme—like "1914" itself!) "wails," or cries out as if it were a suffering human being (making this is an example of personification). In addition to the actual food shortages caused by the war, there are "[f]amines of thought and feeling," and the wine of love is "thin" and tasteless.

This long list of the effects of World War I expresses the speaker's conviction that war causes not only physical but also *spiritual* destruction. The speaker sees the outbreak of war as destroying the very heart of human society: art, poetry, thought, feeling, and love—all things that are opposed to the "foul tornado" of conflict, strife, and greed. The culture, philosophy, and morals that ultimately define European civilization are threatened—and have perhaps already been lost—by the war.

In one sense, the speaker's statements are straightforward, short, and descriptive; there's no flowery, sentimental language here. Yet notice how these lines are conspicuously "broke[n]" up by periods. These heavy pauses, or caesuras, slow the poem and reflect the war's fragmentation and destruction of the heart of society.

In many ways, the last line of the stanza restates the central idea that the outbreak of war has caused the destruction of the most important, central aspects of modern civilization. The speaker expands on the poem's initial metaphor of winter, now comparing "human Autumn" to the prosperous advancement of society leading up to the year 1914 and the beginning of the "Winter of the world":

- The "grain," or harvest, of that autumn encompasses the art, thought, and feeling that is being destroyed by war, as well as the political and social structures that have allowed Europe to advance for so long—in other words, all the good things about human society.
- Now, thanks to the war, that grain "rots," having been "down-hurled."

The line raises questions of agency and blame: Who hurled the grain down? Who is ultimately responsible for the war? Though the speaker clearly blames the Central Powers (the "foul tornado") for starting the war, there's some suggestion here that society *as a whole* could be responsible, at least in part, for rejecting the best of what civilization has to offer and creating an environment in which war could easy break out.

LINES 9-10

> *For after Spring had bloomed in early Greece,*
> *And Summer blazed her glory out with Rome,*

Line 9 marks the sonnet's turn, or *volta*—the moment between the octave (opening eight-line stanza) and sestet (closing six-line stanza) when the poem switches course in some way. Here, the speaker moves from the present moment of war and devastation to a consideration of a more peaceful, prosperous past.

Building on the mention of winter in line 1, the speaker launches into an extended metaphor that uses the seasons to represent the rise and fall of civilization:

- The speaker puts society's "Spring" in ancient

Greece, traditionally thought of as the birthplace of democracy and the first major precursor to modern European civilization. The speaker is building on the fact that spring itself usually symbolizes freshness and new life.

- "Summer" then represents the Roman Empire, which spread civilization, art, language, and technology across the globe. Though Rome eventually collapsed ("Summer blazed her glory out"), the speaker sees that collapse as different from the current moment of global crisis. The fall of Rome paved the way for the development of modern Europe, which rose, in a sense, from Rome's ashes.
- For the speaker, the hot (perhaps too hot!) summer of Rome led to the cooler, more rational, prosperous "human Autumn"—the very same autumn the beginning of World War I has destroyed.

The language of these lines reinforces the turn from the harsh "Winter of the world" to the pleasant "Spring" that "bloomed" in ancient Greece. Following the many caesuras, repeated stressed syllables, and cacophonous sounds of the octave, the opening of the sestet feels light, warm, and free, like a breath of fresh air. There are no mid-line pauses, and the repeated /s/ and /bl/ sounds are pleasing to the ear. The lines also return to perfect, smooth iambic pentameter. All of this contributes to the strong sense of calm at the beginning of the sestet.

LINES 11-12

An Autumn softly fell, a harvest home,
A slow grand age, and rich with all increase.

The "human Autumn" referenced in line 8 returns, now seen in its prime. The speaker completes the poem's central extended metaphor of the seasons by comparing autumn to the "slow grand age" when modern society (especially modern Europe) developed by improving on the foundation left by the ancient civilizations of Greece and Rome.

The metaphor takes in an almost all-encompassing sweep of much of modern human history: the development of European nations and the growth of technology, agriculture, the arts, culture, and more. Autumn is the season of ripening and harvest, "rich with all increase" of good things. This evocation of autumn brings to mind all the good things (art, thought, feeling, love, progress) the war has destroyed; the immense beauty of this human season underscores the tragedy of letting its rich "grain" rot and go to waste.

As in lines 9 and 10, the language of these lines contributes to an atmosphere of calm, growth, and prosperity. Both lines contain a caesura, but the commas are gentle, unlike the harsh colon and periods of the octet. Consonance, alliteration, and subtle assonance create euphony, or rich and pleasing sounds. Note, for example, all the gentle /s/, /f/, and /l/ sounds:

An Autumn softly fell, a harvest home,
A slow grand age, and rich with all increase.

Open /aw/ and long /oh/ vowel sounds add to the soothing, pleasant feel of these lines:

An Autumn softly fell, a harvest home,
A slow grand age, and rich with all increase.

LINES 13-14

But now, for us, wild Winter, and the need
Of sowings for new Spring, and blood for seed.

The poem's last two lines are a sudden jolt back to the disastrous present of the war.

Following the peaceful first four lines of the sestet, lines 13 and 14 form an emphatic rhymed couplet—which is unusual in an Italian sonnet. The quick rhyme between "need" and "seed" highlights the central tension of the poem: the "need" to plant new "seed[s]" is urgent, but the speaker seems uncertain, and perhaps downright doubtful, that this need can be met. That's because the only "seed" available is the blood of those killed in the war—and such a blood sacrifice may not be enough to usher in a new era of peace and prosperity.

As in lines 5–7, short, tense phrases return here, separated by heavy caesuras. This makes the lines fee slow and laborious. The ominous alliteration on the /w/ sound from the poem's opening also returns in "wild Winter," while sibilance threads a threatening hiss throughout line 14:

Of sowings for new Spring, and blood for seed.

Altogether, the poem ends on a sonically intense, disturbing note.

The speaker's ambivalent stance between hope and despair opens up different possible ways of reading the poem. The poem suggests that a "new Spring" may come, but if it does, it will have been paid for with human blood—including, it would turn out, the poet's own (Owen was killed in battle at the age of 25). Whether that blood sacrifice will be enough to secure lasting peace, the poem cannot say for sure.

Moreover, even if lasting peace is established (and the many wars since WWI show that it wasn't), the speaker seems disappointed that the awful, civilization-destroying sacrifice of war was necessary in the first place. "1914," ultimately, is a powerful condemnation of war, a testament to the historic scope of the Great War's destruction, and an indictment of those who push the world down the path of armed conflict.

SYMBOLS

THE SEASONS

The speaker of "1914" uses an extended metaphor to compare the collapse and renewal of civilization to the progression of the seasons, which take on special symbolic power in the poem:

- Winter, the season of darkness and cold weather, symbolizes death and destruction. Here, it indicates the specific destructiveness of war—the death of soldiers and civilians, the bombing of cities, and the decay of the art, morals, and love upon which society depends.
- Spring symbolizes freshness and new life—and, more specifically in the poem, the birth of civilization. The speaker traces this to ancient Greece, while summer, a time of "blaz[ing]" light and heat, reflects the Roman Empire's spread of that civilization.
- When the empire collapsed—"blazed" out in "glory"—the modern world grew from the ashes. The long, slow development of that world (especially the modern nation-states of Europe) is then represented by the "slow grand age" of autumn, a time when crops fully ripen to the point of harvest.
- That prosperous autumn has given way, in 1914, to a sudden, devastating winter, and the speaker is unsure if a "new Spring" will ever come again.

Using the seasons as the poem's defining symbol allows the speaker to create some ambiguity about the power people have to influence the rise and fall of civilization. After all, the seasons are forces of nature that change without regard for human beings or their actions. Perhaps, then, the "Winter of the world" that prompted the poem was in some way inevitable, just as the actual winter season is inevitable.

Yet, the poem also suggests that people have *influenced* these symbolic changes of season—from the ancient Greeks and Romans of early civilization to the Germans and their allies who have created the "foul tornado" of global conflict. People start wars, after all; what's less clear to the speaker is whether they can establish lasting peace following such a devastating, global conflict. Even if people decide they want to sow the seeds for a "new Spring" of peace and prosperity, it may not matter since there is only "blood for seed."

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 9-14

THE TORNADO

The "foul tornado" symbolizes the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire), who fought against the Allies (France, Britain, Russia, Italy, Japan, and others) in World War I. The tornado is said to be "centred at Berlin" because Germany, led by Kaiser Wilhelm II, was the dominant nation of the Central Powers.

At another level, the tornado symbolizes all the "foul" impulses that, in the speaker's view, have led to the war and are destroying human progress. These forces are destructive to art, poetry, thought, feeling, and love—all the things the speaker views as essential to human civilization and prosperity.

The symbol is especially appropriate because tornados form quickly, yet the larger storms that produce them have usually been brewing for much longer. Likewise, the poem suggests, the dark forces that have led to the sudden outbreak of war have been gathering for a long time, though now it's too late to address them in any way besides armed conflict.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-5:** "The foul tornado, centred at Berlin, / Is over all the width of Europe whirled, / Rending the sails of progress."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"1914" contains many examples of alliteration. Take the first two lines, where dramatic, whooshing /w/ sounds add intensity to the speaker's language and, in doing so, emphasize the destructiveness of war:

> War broke: and now the Winter of the world
> With perishing great darkness closes in.

That /w/ occurs again in line 4 ("width of Europe whirled") and line 13 ("wild Winter"), making it a kind of sonic through-line in the poem.

In the poem's octave (or first eight lines), several other repeated consonant sounds contribute to the punishing overall sense of war's destruction. In line 5, for example, the speaker repeats the guttural /r/ sound across a strong mid-line pause, or caesura, reflecting the rip in the "sails of progress." The assonance of the short /eh/ sound adds to the echo on either half of the line:

> Rending the sails of progress. Rent or furled

Likewise, the speaker repeats /f/, /th/, and /h/ sounds in lines with strong caesuras, subtly reminding of the way war breaks society—as well as the lines and repeated sounds of this poem—apart:

> Famines of thought and feeling. Love's wine's thin.
> The grain of human Autumn rots, down-hurled.

Alliteration doesn't always mean doom and gloom, however. Parallel /s/ and /bl/ sounds ("Spring had bloomed" and "Summer blazed") help to signal the sonnet's turn to an atmosphere of relative peace, prosperity, and harmony. Likewise, line 11's "harvest home" takes the bitter, despairing /h/ of line 8 and makes it glad.

Of course, this detour into gladness doesn't last long. While "1914" suggests some hope for society's renewal through the blood sacrifice of war, the speaker doesn't seem extremely optimistic or see much reason for celebration. Nothing indicates the speaker's feelings more strongly than the return to strong, ominous alliteration in the poem's last lines:

> But now, for us, wild Winter, and the need
> Of sowings for new Spring, and blood for seed.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "War," "Winter," "world"
- **Line 2:** "With"
- **Line 4:** "width," "whirled"
- **Line 5:** "Rending," "Rent"
- **Line 7:** "Famines," "thought," "feeling," "thin"
- **Line 8:** "human," "hurled"
- **Line 9:** "Spring," "bloomed"
- **Line 10:** "Summer," " blazed"
- **Line 11:** "harvest home"
- **Line 13:** "wild Winter"
- **Line 14:** "sowings," "Spring," "seed"

CONSONANCE

In "1914," consonance often acts as alliteration's trusty partner. Take the first two lines, for instance, where consonance of /r/, /k/, and /t/ sounds enhances to the dramatic, ominous effect of the obvious /w/ sounds:

> War broke: and now the Winter of the world
> With perishing great darkness closes in.

Consonance works like this throughout the poem, adding intensity to the speaker's language. Take the tight /n/ sounds of line, which make it seem almost as though the line is being said through gritted teeth:

> The grain of human Autumn rots, down-hurled.

As with alliteration, consonance builds up a peaceful, harmonious atmosphere following the poem's turn in line 9. Take a look at lines 11-12 in particular:

> An Autumn softly fell, a harvest home,
> A slow grand age, and rich with all increase.

These lines are themselves "rich with all increase." Now, the repeated /l/, /f/ and /s/ sounds are gentle, lilting, and peaceful. This sonic effect is known as euphony, and it's an important component of what makes this sonnet's turn so powerful and moving.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Line 4
- Line 5
- Line 6
- Line 7
- Line 8
- Line 9
- Line 10
- Line 11
- Line 12
- Line 13
- Line 14

ASSONANCE

There's not as much assonance in "1914" as there is alliteration and consonance. Still, the device plays an important role in communicating the poem's meanings. Take lines 5 and 6 as an example:

> Rending the sails of progress. Rent or furled
> Are all Art's ensigns. [...]

The shared vowel sounds create sonic intensity, drawing particular attention to the lines.

Later, in lines 11–12, long /oh/, /aw/, and short /ih/ sounds contribute to the atmosphere of relative tranquility and euphony as the speaker considers the "slow grand age" of civilization's "August":

> An Autumn softly fell, a harvest home,
> A slow grand age, and rich with all increase.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** “Rending,” “progress. ,” “Rent,” “furled”
- **Line 6:** “Are,” “Art's”
- **Line 11:** “Autumn softly,” “home”
- **Line 12:** “slow,” “rich with,” “increase”

EXTENDED METAPHOR

"1914" begins with a metaphor, as the "Winter of the world" stands in for the darkness, death, and destruction of World War I. This metaphor actually becomes part of the poem's broader extended metaphor, in which the speaker compares the growth and decline of human civilization itself to the cycle of the seasons.

The poem presents this cycle as a sweeping metaphor for the rise and fall of human society. In this rich comparison, spring represents the birth of Western civilization in ancient Greece, summer reflects the glory of the Roman Empire (until its eventual collapse, that is!), and autumn indicates the slow, progressive evolution of modern society (which, in a sense, rose from the ashes of Rome).

The "grain of human Autumn"—the fruits of all that progress—are ready for harvesting, but modern society has left them to "rot." In other words, society has failed to appreciate all the great things about a peaceful and prosperous modern society. This, the speaker implies, is part of what led to the war in the first place.

Finally, winter, as readers have already seen, is the time of the poem's present: 1914, when the worst war up to that point in human history had just begun.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Line 8
- Lines 9-14

ALLUSION

"1914" contains several clear allusions to actual events, times, and places. The title itself refers to the year World War I began, and the entire poem is a critique of that war. The "foul tornado" is a metaphor for the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire), who fought against the Allies (France, Britain, Russia, Italy, Japan, and others) in World War I. The tornado was "centred at Berlin," the capital of Germany.

Besides allusions to World War I, the poem refers to ancient Greece as the "Spring" of civilization. Ancient Greece is well-known for its philosophy, art, and politics (especially its democratic innovations), and it is often regarded as the birthplace of modern European civilization.

Likewise, the speaker sees the Roman Empire, which spread across much of the globe, as the "Summer" of civilization. Rome was a robust and successful empire, though its glory eventually fell, or "blazed out," leading to a prosperous "Autumn" during which the geopolitical landscape of 1914 slowly developed.

These allusions to ancient Greece and Rome—and then the slow development of modern society in the wake of Rome's collapse—give the poem a broad historical scope and emphasize the epic nature of WWI.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “War broke”
- **Line 3:** “The foul tornado, centred at Berlin,”
- **Lines 9-11:** “For after Spring had bloomed in early Greece, / And Summer blazed her glory out with Rome, / An Autumn softly fell,”

METAPHOR

In addition to the poem's overarching comparison between human civilization and the seasons, there are other smaller metaphors throughout "1914" as well. The "foul tornado" of line 3 is a metaphor for the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire) that caused WWI. In a larger sense, it also suggests the deeper impulses that have won humanity over and led to the war; these impulses are destructive to art, thought, feeling, and love.

Later, "Art's ensigns" doesn't literally mean the flags of art; rather, the phrase expresses that art has retreated or been driven away from the public sphere. The war prevents art from occupying the central place in society (and in people's hearts and minds) the speaker seems to think it should.

Similarly, the "[f]amines" of the war are shortages of "thought and feeling," not shortages of food. This lightly metaphorical use of the word underscores the vital importance of thought and feeling—to the speaker, they're just as important as food—while subtly reminding that war does, of course, cause literal famines. It also chimes with the next sentence, "Love's wine's thin," which again gives a shortage of feeling (specifically love) a poignantly physical expression.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-7:** “The foul tornado, centred at Berlin, / Is over all the width of Europe whirled, / Rending the sails of progress. Rent or furled / Are all Art's ensigns. Verse wails. Now begin / Famines of thought and feeling. Love's wine's thin.”

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker enriches the poem's central extended metaphor by giving the seasons a subtle sense of agency, almost as if Winter, Spring, Summer, and Autumn were human beings with wills of

their own. This is called personification, and it gently questions the amount of influence human beings have over the fate of civilization at large.

It's not uncommon for poets to personify the seasons (see John Keats's ode "To Autumn" for a famous example), and the capitalization of the seasons in "1914" indicates that the speaker may be thinking of them as human or even mythical entities, rather than just times of the year. Winter "closes in" with "perishing great darkness"; Summer "blazed her glory out in Rome"; Autumn "softly fell"—there's a suggestion of power and will in the vivid descriptiveness of these statements. The poem may not clearly attribute human actions or feelings to the seasons, but it does suggest the possibility that the seasons have intentions of their own. This suggestion adds nuance and complexity to the poem's critique of World War I and the people who caused it.

There's one more example of personification in the poem: "Verse wails." Poetry, of course, can't literally wail, but it *can* express sadness, anger, and despair, much like people do when they cry out. "1914" itself is something of a "wail[]" against the senseless destruction of war. This subtle personification draws attention to the poem's own critique of its present moment while offering a poignant reminder of the costs of global war.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "the Winter of the world / With perishing great darkness closes in."
- **Line 6:** "Verse wails."
- **Line 10:** "And Summer blazed her glory out with Rome,"

CAESURA

"1914" contains several instances of caesura. In line 1, for example, the colon after "War broke" enacts the breaking being described—war began suddenly, but it also *breaks* human bodies and rips apart the very foundations of civilization, just as the poem's very first line is "broke[n]" by the punctuation. The strong caesura highlights the horror and violence of war in an unsentimental yet powerful way.

Similarly, lines 5–7 contain several strong divisions, which again emphasize the extent to which war has torn the fabric of society apart. The "sails of progress" and "Art's ensigns" have been destroyed, poetry cries out, a famine of "thought and feeling" begins, and the sweet nectar of love is "thin." These terse, direct statements are more poignant and intense thanks to the multiple abrupt pauses within the lines.

Caesura doesn't have to indicate destruction, however. In lines 11 and 12, gentler pauses (commas now, not colons or periods) contribute to the harmony and calm of the prosperous "harvest home" the lines describe. But this calm doesn't last long: line 13 contains three sharp pauses in quick succession. These underscore the speaker's grave return to the present moment, when the desperation of war creates the "need / Of sowings for new Spring" and the uncertainty that such a spring will ever come.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "broke: and"
- **Line 3:** "tornado, centred"
- **Line 5:** "progress. Rent"
- **Line 6:** "ensigns. Verse wails. Now"
- **Line 7:** "feeling. Love's"
- **Line 8:** "rots, down-hurled"
- **Line 11:** "fell, a"
- **Line 12:** "age, and"
- **Line 13:** "now, for us, wild Winter, and"
- **Line 14:** "Spring, and"

JUXTAPOSITION

The ending of "1914" is especially powerful thanks to the juxtaposition between the prosperous "Autumn" of modern civilization and the present "wild Winter" of war, death, and destruction.

This sudden contrast corresponds with a formal shift in the poem's rhyme scheme. The first four lines of this stanza, which describe the peaceful spring, summer, and fall of human life on earth, rhyme CDDC. But the last two lines here form a couplet ("need" rhymes with "speed" in the next line). This switch happens just as the speaker plunges the poem back into the present "Winter" and in doing so reiterates the relative lack of hope for civilization's renewal. The stark juxtaposition between the glory of humanity's past and the horror of its present emphasizes the total destruction of war. It also drives home the speaker's uncertainty that "blood for seed" (that is, the bloodshed caused by this war) will be sufficient to bring about a "new Spring" of lasting peace.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-14:** "An Autumn softly fell, a harvest home, / A slow grand age, and rich with all increase. / But now, for us, wild Winter, and the need / Of sowings for new Spring, and blood for seed."

VOCABULARY

War (Line 1) - Specfically World War I, which began in July and August of 1914.

Winter (Line 1, Line 13) - A metaphor for World War I, a time (like the winter season) of death and destruction. The poem's use of winter is part of an extended metaphor comparing the cycle of human progress to the shifting seasons.

Perishing (Line 2) - Destructive, deadly.

Whirled (Line 4) - Thrown or spun in a circular direction, often violently.

Rending (Line 5) - Violently ripping or tearing something apart.

Rent (Line 5) - Ripped or torn up into pieces.

Furled (Line 5) - Rolled or wrapped up, as a flag around a flagpole.

Art's (Line 6) - Art in a broad, expansive sense, including the visual arts, poetry, music, and beyond. The poem sees Art as a marker of progress, humanity, and civilization, as opposed to the destruction and depravity of war.

Ensigns (Line 6) - Flags displaying an identifying marker, badge, or emblem.

Verse (Line 6) - Poetry, especially poetry that follows a regular meter (like "1914" itself!).

Thin (Line 7) - Lacking in taste and concentration. The word could mean that love's wine is literally watered down (which would certainly make it taste thin!), but it could be that the wine itself is thin to begin with. Either way, the point is that the love (both romantic and fraternal) that holds society together is being threatened by the cold, unfeeling, destructive forces of war.

Down-hurled (Line 8) - Forcefully thrown down to the ground. The "grain of human Autumn"—the rich blessings of human progress—have been rejected and cast away, leading to war.

Harvest home (Line 11) - A time and place of progress, comfort, and rich abundance. In the poem's extended metaphor comparing the cycle of human progress to the seasons, the harvest home corresponds with Autumn, the "slow grand age" during which modern European civilization developed.

Sowings (Line 14) - Seeds to be planted.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"1914" is a variation of the Italian (also called Petrarchan) sonnet. Italian sonnets begin with an eight-line stanza (called an octave), which itself contains two four-line quatrains, and end with a six-line stanza (or sestet) that can be subdivided into two three-line tercets. There's usually a notable shift (in tone, subject matter, time, setting, or all of the above!) between the octave and sestet. This formal shift is called the sonnet's turn, or *volta*.

True to its form, "1914" is divided into two stanzas: an opening octave and a closing sestet. That octave can be broken into two quatrains and the sestet into two tercets. There's a major shift (in tone, time, and setting) in line 9, when the speaker moves from talking about modern war to discussing human history more broadly.

Note, however, that the poem actually ends with a rhyming couplet—something that's not unheard of, but also not typical of, Italian sonnets. This couplet gives the poem something of the flavor of an English (or Shakespearean) sonnet, which contains three four-line quatrains followed by a couplet. The sonnet is technically still Italian, with a strong turn between the octave and sestet, but it also benefits from the foreboding power of the concluding couplet rhyme between "need" and "seed."

There's also a secondary shift between line 12 and the final couplet. Whereas the volta between the octave and sestet moved from the "Winter" of World War I to the blossoming of civilization in ancient Greece, the poem now turns from the rich "Autumn" of civilization *back* to the "wild" and horrifying present of a world at war. This formal trajectory underscores the urgency of the "need" for a "new Spring"—and the difficulty, or perhaps impossibility, of a true renewal of human society.

METER

Like most Italian sonnets, "1914" is written in iambic pentameter, a meter in which each line contains five iambs (feet with an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern). Take lines 3 and 4 as an example:

> The foul | torna- | do, cent- | red at | Berlin,
> Is ov- | er all | the width | of Eur- | ope whirled,

A closer look at the meter throughout the poem, however, shows that not every line is in perfect iambic pentameter. Owen sometimes modifies the expected number or order of stressed and unstressed syllables in a line, resulting in a more flexible, expressive overall meter. Let's listen to the first two lines to get an idea of how this can work:

> War broke: | and now | the Win- | ter of | the world
> With per- | ishing | great dark- | ness clos- | es in.

Notice how the strong double stress (called a spondee) on "War broke" makes the poem's opening statement seem even more sudden, surprising, and intense. This variation of the line's first foot highlights the shock and violence of war, which "broke" out (that is, began) but also *breaks* human bodies and the human spirit of civilization.

In line 2, the middle part of the line ("perishing great darkness") differs from the expected da-dum iambic rhythm. The second foot is called a pyrrhic (unstressed-unstressed), and the third foot is another spondee (stressed-stressed). The rhythm of the word "perishing" seems to mirror the word's meaning: after a strong stress, the word itself perishes with two quick, light unstressed syllables. Then, another strong double stress emphasizes the immense scope of the "great darkness" that is closing in on the world.

The rest of this stanza (the octave) contains other repeated stresses, such as "Verse wails" and "Love's wine's thin." These moments—which express the desperation of art and love caused by the war—seem even more devastating because of their strong, insistent rhythm packed into short, single sentences.

But the meter of "1914" doesn't always express darkness and destruction. Following a lot of variation and repeated stressed syllables in the octave, the first three lines of the sestet return to the relative peace and calm of straightforward iambic pentameter. This makes sense because the lines describe the prosperous spring, summer, and fall of human civilization, which contrast with the present winter of war.

In line 12, there's another repeated stress, but it emphasizes the prosperity and growth of human autumn (a "slow grand age") rather than death and destruction:

A slow | grand age, | and rich | with all | increase.

In this poem, death and destruction can't be held off for too long. Notice how, with the shift back to the war-torn present in the final couplet, two more double stresses rear their heads: "wild Winter" and "new Spring." These final moments of metrical variation signal a return to the ominous, deadly atmosphere of the poem's beginning. They also emphasize the speaker's relative lack of hope that a true renewal of civilization will be possible with only "blood for seed."

RHYME SCHEME

"1914" follows a variation of the typical rhyme scheme of an Italian (or Petrarchan) sonnet:

ABBAABBA CDDCEE

In other words, the opening eight-line stanza (the octave) contains two four-line quatrains that rhyme ABBA. This rhyme pattern is often called enclosed rhyme because the A rhyme "encloses" the B rhyme. Also notice how these first eight lines share the same two rhyme sounds, A and B. The shared sounds give the octave a sense of cohesion and focus. The intensity created by the repeated rhyme sounds contributes to the dark, desperate, threatening atmosphere of the lines, which vividly describe the high costs of war.

The last six lines of an Italian sonnet, called the sestet, usually rhyme CDEDCE or CDCDCD, though poets have come up with several other variations. "1914" uses one of these, CDDCEE, which was also used by John Donne, Thomas Wyatt, and others. This rhyme produces a special effect because it causes the poem to end with a rhymed couplet (EE), which is a typical feature of the English (or Shakespearean) sonnet.

Make no mistake: "1914" is still an Italian sonnet, with its strong division between the octave and sestet and its use of enclosed rhyme (ABBA and CDDC) instead of an English sonnet's alternating rhyme (ABAB, CDCD, and so on). The couplet rhyme between "need" and "seed" is especially impactful because it is unexpected; Italian sonnets don't usually end on such a strong repeated sound. By choosing to end the poem this way, the speaker emphasizes the dire urgency and tragic uncertainty of civilization's renewal.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "1914" remains anonymous, though it's clear that this speaker cares a lot about World War I and its negative effects on society (especially European civilization). The speaker sees the "foul tornado" (a symbol for Germany and its allies, who made up the Central Powers) as destroying not only human lives but also art, thought, feeling, and love. Throughout the poem, the speaker takes a long, historical view of human progress and morals, arguing that the Great War represents a tragic, dramatic break from everything that has made human society worth preserving.

It's useful to note that Wilfred Owen himself (or a soldier in World War I, as he was) *could* be the speaker of the poem. Owen wrote the poem in late 1914, shortly before enlisting in the British army, and likely revised it following his experiences in battle. As in "1914," most of the speakers of his poems talk about war in a no-nonsense way, with a sharp awareness of the catastrophe war represents to individual human beings and to civilization at large. Whether Owen is the speaker of his poems or not, it's clear that his work (including "1914") was strongly influenced by his own personal experiences and his deep sense of the tragedy of WWI.

SETTING

The general setting of "1914" is Europe, specifically the part of Western Europe that was heavily impacted by World War I. This could be England (where Owen was from), or France (where he was living when he wrote the poem and where he later fought in battle), or Western Europe more broadly. In any case, the poem laments the war that is "clos[ing] in" on this part of the world and worries about the possibility of a peaceful, prosperous future for Western Europe and the world at large.

The poem makes a brief detour in line 9, where the speaker considers the "Spring" that "bloomed" in ancient Greece, the birthplace of democracy and, in the speaker's view, modern civilization. In line 10, the speaker likewise considers ancient Rome, which spread its empire across the globe. These brief excursions to ancient times and places help to emphasize the harsh reality of World War I when the speaker returns in line 13 to the "wild Winter" of the present.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Though "1914" is most obviously a reaction to the outbreak of World War I, it also represents a reaction to traditional ways of writing about war. Before Wilfred Owen and his contemporaries began writing, many poets presented war in a highly patriotic, idealized, perhaps even naive way. These poems tended to glorify war and emphasize the heroism of soldiers, especially those who died in battle. This type of poem is perhaps best exemplified by the work of Rupert Brooke.

In contrast, Owen's poems often offer a scathing critique of war. They are unsentimental and clear-eyed about the true horrors of war, especially the devastating trench warfare of WWI. His later poems, especially, often offer the intimate point of view of the soldier, who becomes the speaker of the poem rather than an abstract hero. As in "1914," Owen doesn't shy away from openly lamenting war's devastation or the existential, spiritual threat it poses to civilization.

"1914" is a somewhat early poem—Owen first drafted it *before* he had experienced battle—so it doesn't reflect his personal experience of the trenches as vividly as later, more famous poems such as "Dulce et Decorum Est" and "Anthem for Doomed Youth." It's likely, however, that he revised the poem in 1917 or 1918—under the influence of Siegfried Sassoon, his friend and poetic mentor who also served in the war—so it carries the weight of his experiences even if the identity of the speaker remains unspecified.

Owen wrote poetry from a young age, and his skillful handling of traditional forms, such as the Italian sonnet, indicates his familiarity with the English poetic tradition. In particular, he may have been influenced by the work of A. E. Housman, whose collection *A Shropshire Lad* was wildly popular among British soldiers in WWI. Like Housman, Owen often portrayed the beauty and dignity of the male body in his poems, and his centering of the male soldier's inner, emotional experience chimes with Housman's elegiac celebrations of beautiful young men, especially athletes and soldiers. In "1914," Owen may also have been thinking of the metaphorical richness of the seasons in poems such as "The Human Seasons" by John Keats (another poet who died at the age of 25), "Spring and Fall" by Gerard Manley Hopkins, and many others.

Most of Owen's poems were published posthumously, in 1920. They had an immediate and strong influence on other poets and the reading public at large. Many Modernist poets (most of whom had never been to war) began to respond to the horrors of WWI and the fragmentation of civilization it represented, undoubtedly influenced by Owen's work. It's hard to imagine that T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" (published in 1922) or the *Cantos* of Ezra Pound would be the same without Owen's example. Writers responding to later wars—World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and many others—were also strongly influenced by Owen's approach to writing about war, and that influence continues today.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The First World War "broke" out in July and August of 1914 following the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand of Austria. The assassination rapidly escalated global tensions that had been brewing for years. Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia, Germany invaded Belgium, and the stage was quickly set for one of the most devastating wars in human history.

"1914" directly responds to the beginning of the Great War, as WWI is sometimes called. The poem's short, sudden opening statement ("War broke") echoes the astonishing speed with which the war actually began, and Berlin (the center of the "foul tornado") was the capital of Germany, led by Kaiser Wilhelm II and perhaps the most important Central Power.

The poem was likely written at the end of 1914, shortly before Wilfred Owen enlisted in the British army. He fought with the Manchester Regiment in France, where he saw heavy combat. While being treated in Edinburgh for shell shock, he met fellow poet and soldier Siegfried Sassoon, who became Owen's friend and mentor and who introduced him to major literary figures such as Robert Graves. He experienced a rush of creative energy during this time and probably revised "1914"—though like most of his poems, it wasn't published until after his death. Wilfred Owen died on the battlefield in France on November 4, 2018—just a week before Armistice Day—at the age of 25.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Owen's Life and Work — A short biography of Wilfred Owen. (https://poets.org/poet/wilfred-owen)
- Wilfred Owen: A Remembrance Tale — A BBC Documentary about Owen's life and work. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zsPdEgC0wdk)
- The Poetry of World War I — A sampling of poetry inspired by the Great War. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/70139/the-poetry-of-world-war-i)
- Drafts of "1914" — Manuscript versions of the poem from Oxford's digital archive of First World War poetry. (http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/search?query=1914+owen&collection=&Search=Go)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILFRED OWEN POEMS

- Anthem for Doomed Youth
- Disabled
- Dulce et Decorum Est
- Exposure

- Futility
- Mental Cases
- Strange Meeting
- The Next War

HOW TO CITE

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