Beat! Beat! Drums!

POEM TEXT

Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!
Through the windows—through doors—burst like a ruthless force,
Into the solemn church, and scatter the congregation,
Into the school where the scholar is studying,
Leave not the bridegroom quiet—no happiness must he have now with his bride,
Nor the peaceful farmer any peace, ploughing his field or gathering his grain,
So fierce you whirr and pound you drums—so shrill you bugles blow.

Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!
Over the traffic of cities—over the rumble of wheels in the streets;
Are beds prepared for sleepers at night in the houses? no sleepers must sleep in those beds,
No bargainers' bargains by day—no brokers or speculators—would they continue?
Would the talkers be talking? would the singer attempt to sing?
Would the lawyer rise in the court to state his case before the judge?
Then rattle quicker, heavier drums—you bugles wilder blow.

Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!
Make no parley—stop for no expostulation,
Mind not the timid—mind not the weeper or prayer,
Mind not the old man beseeching the young man,
Let not the child's voice be heard, nor the mother's entreaties,
Make even the trestles to shake the dead where they lie awaiting the hearses,
So strong you thump O terrible drums—so loud you bugles blow.

SUMMARY

You military drums, pound away! And you bugle horns, blow as loudly as you can! Let your noise rush through windows and doors like an unstoppable, pitiless force, into quiet churches where it'll send worshipers running off in different directions, and into classrooms where students are trying to focus on their work. Interrupt the quiet of grooms on their wedding day, making sure they can't focus on simply enjoying themselves with their new brides. And don't let quiet farmers have any moments of peace while cultivating their crops. This is how unrelenting and ear-piercing your pounding must be, drums, and how harsh your sound must be, bugle horns.

You military drums, pound away! And you bugle horns, blow as loudly as you can! Drown out the sound of city traffic, with all those carriage wheels rumbling down the streets. Are there beds ready in hotels for people to climb into at night? Then nobody must be allowed to actually fall asleep in them. Businesspeople in the marketplace—are they trying to go on trading? Are people still talking? Are singers still trying to sing? Is the lawyer still getting up in court to present an argument to a judge? Well then, drums, you must just beat harder and faster, and you bugles must blast even louder.

You military drums, pound away! And you bugle horns, blow as loudly as you can! Don't stop to reconsider what you're doing. Pay no attention to hesitant people who cry and pray, and pay no attention to old men pleading with young men. Drown out children's voices and their mothers' pleas. Play so loudly that the tables holding dead bodies shake while the bodies wait to be hauled into hearses. This is how forcefully you should beat, drums, and how deafeningly you should roar, bugle horns.

THEMES

THE DISRUPTIVE NATURE OF WAR

Written after the first battle of the Civil War, "Beat! Beat! Drums!" presents war as something all-consuming and disruptive to practically every aspect of daily life. The speaker tells the drums of a military band to sound the alarm of war in a way that will make it impossible to ignore. In doing so, the speaker frames the Civil War—and, in turn, war in general—as a "ruthless force" capable of stopping the country in its tracks. War, the poem implies, affects *everything*.

Because the speaker *tells* the drums and bugle horns of a military band to raucously sound out, there's a certain implication that things shouldn't just go along like normal during wartime. This is why the speaker wants the drums and bugles to blast through "solemn church[es]," "peaceful" farmlands, and quiet houses. Simply put, nothing in everyday life can go undisturbed when a disastrous war is afoot.

In some ways, this sentiment could be read as a patriotic call to action: by insisting that the sounds of war should interfere with

the workings of daily life, the speaker indicates that nothing could possibly be important enough to keep people from supporting the war effort.

In another sense, though, the fact that the drums and bugles interrupt so many *positive* activities shows war's harmful effect on society. The sound of the drums, the speaker says, will burst into "the school where the scholar is studying." This means the war will keep people from learning, stifling all academic progress. It will also interrupt marriages, prevent "bargainers" from trading, and keep lawyers from defending their clients. It's not just that war demands attention, then, but that it completely overshadows everything—even things that are essential to the smooth functioning of society.

The poem is therefore both a gung-ho rallying cry *and* an acknowledgment of the many ways in which war unsettles society. War, the poem argues, is so powerful that it grinds everything to a halt. This idea is best illustrated by the final image of dead soldiers lying on "trestles" as they wait for their hearses. Since nothing could possibly upend a community more than the death of its young men, this, it seems, is the ultimate disruption of society, as the war brings the country to its knees with its devastating death toll.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-21

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!
Through the windows—through doors—burst like a ruthless force,
Into the solemn church, and scatter the congregation,
Into the school where the scholar is studying,

The poem opens with apostrophe, as the speaker directly addresses the instruments of a military band. The speaker enthusiastically tells drums and bugle horns to "beat" and "blow"—that is, to boldly announce their presence by making make lots of noise!

The poem was composed shortly after the first battle of the Civil War, and the opening line thus looks like a rallying cry of sorts. It seems as though if the point of the poem is to urge these instruments to alert the country to the beginning of the war.

The poem's opening line is energetic and attention-grabbing, thanks to alliteration of the /b/ sound, repetition (specifically epizeuxis and diacope), and caesuras. All these devices add a strong rhythmic pulse to poem's the language that appropriately mimics the sound of forceful drumbeats:

Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!

But the poem isn't just a rallying cry, and all this intense sound also helps the speaker convey the alarming *disruption* that comes along with war—the way that it interrupts every corner of daily life.

- For example, the speaker says that the noises of the military band "burst" through "windows" and "doors," as if nothing can keep the war at bay.
- The speaker uses a simile to build upon this idea, comparing the war to a "ruthless," or unstoppable and merciless, "force" that interrupts and overshadows everything it comes in contact with.

In keeping with this, the speaker describes the sounds of war tearing through "the solemn church," where it "scatter[s] the congregation."

- This is a perfect example of just how disruptive war really is, as it has the power to break into even the most sacred places (like church) and send the most calm, devoted people (a religious congregation) running in different directions.
- In other words, war turns peace and serenity to utter chaos.

One strange thing about the poem, however, is that the speaker seems to *encourage* the drums and bugles to interrupt everyday life. In this way, the poem implies that people *shouldn't* just go about their normal lives while a ruthless war takes shape. The poem at once urges people to pay attention to the Civil War while acknowledging the many downsides of this kind of interruption, showing the ways in which war grinds society to a halt.

LINES 5-7

Leave not the bridegroom quiet—no happiness must he have now with his bride,
Nor the peaceful farmer any peace, ploughing his field or gathering his grain,
So fierce you whirr and pound you drums—so shrill you bugles blow.

The speaker continues to illustrate the ways in which war disrupts everyday life. "Leave not the bridegroom quiet," the speaker says, using apostrophe to tell the drums and bugles of a military band to interrupt a wedding.

- The idea here is that the call of war will ruin any sense of calm or peace ("quiet") that a groom would otherwise have on his wedding day. This is because young men are expected to join the war effort, marching away from their lives and onto the

battlefield.
- Not only will this ruin a groom's sense of calm on his wedding day, then, but it will also actively prevent him from carrying out the traditions that normally come along with a wedding; instead of consummating the marriage, he will have no time for "happiness" with his new bride. And this, of course, is because it will be impossible to ignore the influence of the war.

Similarly, a farmer "ploughing his field or gathering his grain" will no longer be able to do so in "peace," since the sounds of war will "whirr" around him. Nothing, it seems, can go untouched by the chaos and calamity of war! Although actual physical battles are isolated to specific areas, even the most remote places—like quiet farmlands—can't remain peaceful during wartime.

The speaker's use of free verse is on full display as this first stanza comes to an end. Line 5, for instance, is sprawling and long—nothing like the poem's opening line, which is significantly shorter. But this wide-ranging flow doesn't mean the poem isn't musical. In fact, the speaker's language is very rhythmic and pleasing, partly due to the use of repetition. For example, the speaker uses polyptoton in line 6 to repeat a different version of the word "peaceful":

> Nor the **peaceful** farmer any **peace**, [...]

This repetition emphasizes the idea that war completely *destroys* any sense of peace. The speaker's words are also quite alliterative, especially in phrases like "**g**athering his **g**rain" or "so shrill you **b**ugles **b**low." This adds yet more power and strength to the speaker's call to action, aligning the poem's language with the insistent, inescapable sounds of war.

LINES 8-11

> *Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!*
> *Over the traffic of cities—over the rumble of wheels in the streets;*
> *Are beds prepared for sleepers at night in the houses? no sleepers must sleep in those beds,*
> *No bargainers' bargains by day—no brokers or speculators—would they continue?*

The second stanza begins by repeating of the poem's first line, which it now becomes clear is the poem's refrain. The speaker once again tells the drums to "beat" and the bugles to "blow," using emphatic exclamation points to convey the sheer force and energy of war.

This energy, the poem implies, overpowers even the busiest, most hectic environments. The drums drift over "the traffic of cities," for example, drowning out the sound of wagon wheels "rumbl[ing] in the streets." Whereas the first stanza focused on how the noises of war disrupt quiet, peaceful places, the speaker now suggests that the war will even disrupt city life, which is usually its own kind of unstoppable force.

In the same way that the drums and bugles interrupt weddings and make it impossible for students to learn, they also keep people from sleeping and interfere with street markets, preventing "bargainers" and sellers from doing business. There are, in other words, no aspects of daily life that can possibly continue along like normal during wartime.

This is why the speaker wonders how the bargainers and traders will possibly go on now that the chaos of war has descended upon the city, skeptically asking, "[W]ould they continue?" Of course, the implication of this rhetorical question is that they *won't* be able to go on.

In these lines, the speaker once again uses repetition to add musicality to the language. Consider, for example, the anaphora in line 9, in which the speaker repeats the phrase "over the":

> **Over the** traffic of cities—**over the** rumble of wheels in the streets;

This gives the line a consistent, rhythmic sound while also highlighting the idea that the sounds of war easily drown out everything else—even the loudest noises of daily life.

The speaker also uses diacope and polyptoton in line 10, repeating "beds" and a variation on the word "sleep":

> Are **beds** prepared for **sleepers** at night in the houses? no **sleepers** must **sleep** in those **beds**.

This makes the language sound pleasing and consistent, as does the polyptoton in the phrase "bargainers' bargains" in the next line.

LINES 12-14

> *Would the talkers be talking? would the singer attempt to sing?*
> *Would the lawyer rise in the court to state his case before the judge?*
> *Then rattle quicker, heavier drums—you bugles wilder blow.*

The speaker strings together several rhetorical questions, wondering if things in daily life will continue like normal amidst the chaos of war. Because the poem has already made it clear that war is deeply disruptive, it's obvious that the speaker isn't *actually* asking these questions—the questions simply invite readers to consider all the things that will grind to a halt during war.

The speaker's rhetorical questions imply that "talkers" will stop "talking" and "singer[s]" will stop "sing[ing]"—a good illustration of how the noise of war drowns out all signs of happiness and vibrant activity. And in the same way that "bargainers" will stop

trading in the streets, the speaker hints that lawyers won't be able to make their cases in court. Because the courtroom is a symbol of orderliness, this is a perfect indication of just how extensively war will upend the smooth functioning of society.

In line 14, readers will remember that the speaker uses apostrophe to actually *address* the drums and bugles of a military band. The questions in lines 12 and 13 are rhetorical and are mainly intended to outline the ways in which war interrupts everyday life, but they also help the speaker express a specific idea in the poem's overall address to the drums and bugles—namely, that *if* society is still somehow able to function normally during war, the drums and bugles should sound out even louder. In other words, if "talkers" can still "talk[]" and "singer[s]" can still "sing," then the drums should "rattle quicker" and "heavier," and the bugles should "blow" even "wilder" than before.

The strange thing about this, of course, is that the speaker seems to *want* the war to interfere with daily life. But this isn't necessarily an endorsement of war. Instead, it's simply an acknowledgment that society shouldn't just go about in ignorant bliss while bloody, devastating battles rage on the front lines. This is why the poem is both a rallying cry *and* a concerned commentary on the disruptive nature of war. The speaker isn't happy that the Civil War will shake society to its core, but the speaker *does* want everyone to acknowledge the gravity of what's going on.

Polyptoton is noticeable in this section, since the speaker riffs on the words "talk" and "sing" in line 12:

> Would the talkers be talking? would the singer
> attempt to sing?

This builds on the poem's musical sound, adding a sense of rhythm and consistency to the language. Lines 13 and 14 also feature more consonance, alliteration, and assonance. Note all the /r/, hard /c/, /ay/, /b/, /l/, /oo/, and /o/ sounds here:

> Would the lawyer rise in the court to state his case
> before the judge?
> Then rattle quicker, heavier drums—you bugles
> wilder blow.

All these shared sounds once again turn up the volume on the poem, evoking the inescapable sound of the bugles and drums themselves.

LINES 15-18

Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!
Make no parley—stop for no expostulation,
Mind not the timid—mind not the weeper or prayer,
Mind not the old man beseeching the young man,

The speaker returns to the poem's refrain, once more using apostrophe to tell the drums and bugles of a military band to make as much noise as possible. Building on this, the speaker tells the instruments to waste no time in alerting society to the reality of war, saying:

> Make no parley—stop for no expostulation,

To "parley" means to stop and confer with someone else. The word is often used in a military context, since it can refer to the act of communicating or bargaining with an enemy. Similarly, to "expostulate" is to reason with another person. This means that the speaker doesn't want the drums and bugles to waste time or make compromises. Instead, they should burst forth and disrupt life without hesitation, since war itself is relentless and destructive.

The speaker's use of apostrophe contains a hint of personification in this section, since the speaker talks to the drums and bugles as if they have personal agency—as if they're human. This is especially the case in lines 17 and 18, when the speaker says:

> Mind not the timid—mind not the weeper or prayer,
> Mind not the old man beseeching the young man,

By using anaphora and repeating the phrase "mind not," the speaker calls attention to the fact that the poem (at least in this moment) treats the instruments like human beings who could potentially feel bad about inconveniencing others with the loud announcement of war.

This, the speaker says, isn't something the instruments should take into account; they shouldn't let "timid" people keep them from sounding the alarm of war, nor should they get hung up on people who weep and pray in response to the disturbing news of the Civil War. Lastly, the instruments should take no heed of older generations pleading with young men (presumably trying to convince them not to go to war).

By telling the drums and bugles not to get distracted by these things, the speaker implies that nothing is important enough to get in the way of the war. Again, this might seem like a full-throated endorsement of the Civil War—and maybe it is, in some ways—but it's *mainly* an indication that the speaker thinks people shouldn't live in ignorant bliss when there's a disastrous war afoot.

LINES 19-21

Let not the child's voice be heard, nor the mother's entreaties,
Make even the trestles to shake the dead where they lie awaiting the hearses,
So strong you thump O terrible drums—so loud you bugles blow.

In the poem's final three lines, the speaker continues to use

apostrophe, addressing the drums and bugles of a military band directly and urging them not to let anything stop them from raising the alarm of war. These sounds, the speaker says, should drown out the voices of loving families—an idea indicating that war is merciless and unrelenting, not the kind of thing that stops for mothers pleading for the safety of their sons and husbands who have gone off to battle.

But, the speaker implies, mothers *do* have good reason for their distress, as made clear by the image of dead soldiers lying on wooden tables before they're loaded into hearses and taken away. Until this moment, the poem is mostly about the raucous and disruptive energy that comes along with war, but now the speaker acknowledges the devastating toll of violent conflict.

The drums and bugles will continue to sound out, the speaker says, shaking the dead bodies. This is a poignant moment because the instruments of the military band have, until now, been capable of bringing everyone to attention—the loud sounds have had a noticeable effect on everything in life. Unlike everything else, though, the dead soldiers can't hear these instruments. They can't, in other words, hear the very sounds that inspired them to join the war in the first place.

By highlighting this harrowing image, the speaker opens up space in the poem for readers to consider the horrors and tragic losses of war.

- This is what makes "Beat! Beat! Drums!" more nuanced than a typical rah-rah pro-war poem, but it's also not necessarily *anti*-war, either.
- Walt Whitman himself believed in the abolition of slavery and strongly supported the Union effort to defeat the pro-slavery Confederate states. But he was also most likely weary of the horrible violence and staggering loss of life that came along with the war.
- This is a dynamic reflected in "Beat! Beat! Drums!" as the speaker tells people not to ignore the war while simultaneously recognizing the many travesties that come along with this kind of violence.

With its use of sibilance and assonance, the final line of the poem helps communicate the speaker's heightened emotion. The sibilant /s/ sound alliterates in the phrase "so strong," while the assonant /uh/ sound appears in "thump" and "drums." There's also the shared /yoo/ in "you bugles," as well as the alliterative /b/ in "bugles blow." Altogether, these sounds make the language sound dense and musical, increasing the poem's intensity so that it ends on a strong, emotional note.

SYMBOLS

THE CHURCH, THE SCHOOL, AND THE COURTROOM

Because churches, schools, and courtrooms are all serious places of discipline and order, they symbolize the many aspects of normal life that are completely upended by the chaos of war. A church, for example, is usually peaceful and "solemn," but the speaker suggests that the noise of military drums and bugles will "scatter the congregation." In other words, this otherwise serene, composed place will erupt into mayhem!

The same thing applies to the "school where the scholar is studying." Anyone trying to concentrate on their studies would obviously have a very hard time doing so over the noise of pounding drums and blasting bugle horns.

Schools are also places where young and old minds alike strive to improve themselves. Interrupting this thus interferes with a valuable kind of progress; if the classroom represents self-improvement and societal growth, then this interruption illustrates the extent to which war grinds society to a halt by making it impossible for people to learn. Similarly, the courtroom is a place of order and procedure, so the idea of drums and bugles preventing lawyers from making their cases symbolizes just how much war throws well-organized areas of life into disarray.

Altogether, these three institutions (church, school, and courtroom) help the speaker highlight the destructive and disruptive nature of war.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Into the solemn church, and scatter the congregation,"
- **Line 4:** "Into the school where the scholar is studying,"
- **Line 13:** "Would the lawyer rise in the court to state his case before the judge?"

POETIC DEVICES

REPETITION

"Beat! Beat! Drums!" is bursting with repetition, which adds a feeling of intensity and rhythm to the speaker's language. The poem is about the disruption war causes, and the repetition itself reflects that: certain words and ideas are entirely unavoidably in the poem, insistently popping up again and again.

The most obvious example of this is the poem's refrain, which appears in the first line of each stanza:

> Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!

Every stanza begins in exactly the same way, with the speaker directly calling out to the drums and bugles of a military band. The repetition reflects the idea that these sounds never cease, and invade every aspect of daily life.

There's also lots of repetition with the refrain itself. The speaker uses epizeuxis by repeating the word "beat" twice in a row, as well as diacope and epanalepsis in the phrase "**blow!** bugles! **blow!**" There's even a hint of parallelism, since "Beat! beat! drums!" uses a similarly commanding sentence structure as "blow! bugles! blow!" Again, this makes the refrain ring out all the more powerfully and memorably.

There are lots of other moments of repetition throughout the poem as well—most notably anaphora and polyptoton, each discussed separately in this guide.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!"
- **Line 2:** "Through," "through"
- **Line 3:** "Into the"
- **Line 4:** "Into the"
- **Line 6:** "peaceful," "peace"
- **Line 7:** "So fierce you whirr and pound you drums," "so shrill you bugles blow"
- **Line 8:** "Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!"
- **Line 9:** "Over the," "over the"
- **Line 10:** "beds," "sleepers," "no," "sleepers," "sleep," "beds"
- **Line 11:** "No," "bargainers' bargains," "no," "would"
- **Line 12:** "Would the," "talkers," "talking," "would the," "singer," "sing"
- **Line 13:** "Would the"
- **Line 14:** "Then rattle quicker, heavier drums," "you bugles wilder blow"
- **Line 15:** "Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!"
- **Line 16:** "Make no," "stop for no"
- **Line 17:** "Mind not," "mind not"
- **Line 18:** "Mind not"
- **Line 19:** "Let not"
- **Line 21:** "So strong you thump O terrible drums," "so loud you bugles blow"

ANAPHORA

Repetition is vital to the structure of "Beat! Beat! Drums!"—and one of the most obvious form of repetition throughout is anaphora. The speaker uses anaphora time and again to add intensity and rhythm to the poem, heightening its language to reflect the urgency of war and to drive home the argument that war's effects reverberate throughout society.

Consider, for example, lines 2 through 4:

> **Through** the windows—**through** doors—burst like a ruthless force,
> **Into the** solemn church, and scatter the congregation,
> **Into the** school where the scholar is studying,

The anaphora in line 2 repeats the word "through," emphasizing the image of the military music "burst[ing]" through buildings—an illustration of just how much war disrupts everyday life. The repetition of the phrase "into the" also highlights this idea, calling attention to the idea of music rushing "into" otherwise peaceful environments like churches or classrooms.

The speaker uses yet more anaphora in line 9:

> **Over the** traffic of cities—**over the** rumble of wheels in the streets;

Once again, this anaphora spotlights the notion that the drums and bugles will overshadow everything in society, blanketing cities with the sound of wartime chaos.

But anaphora doesn't just help the speaker underline important ideas; it also adds a sense of structure to the language. For example, the repetition of the word "no" at the beginning of each phrase in line 11 flows into the repetition of the phrase "would," which continues in line 12. This gives the section a pleasingly consistent sound:

> **No** bargainers' bargains by day—**no** brokers or speculators—**would** they continue?
> **Would** the talkers be talking? **would** the singers attempt to sing?

There's a certain rhythm that comes along with all this anaphora, giving lines a hint of regularity and rhythm. Anaphora thus helps the speaker's words seem structured and well-organized even though the poem is written in free verse.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Through," "through"
- **Line 3:** "Into the"
- **Line 4:** "Into the"
- **Line 7:** "So," "so"
- **Line 9:** "Over the," "over the"
- **Line 11:** "No," "no," "would"
- **Line 12:** "Would the," "would the"
- **Line 17:** "Mind not the," "mind not the"
- **Line 18:** "Mind not the"
- **Line 21:** "So," "so"

APOSTROPHE

The speaker uses apostrophe throughout the entire poem,

directly addressing the drums and bugle horns of a military band.

Military bands were common during the Civil War and were even present on the battlefield. The music they played helped inspire the soldiers, and it also helped organize them during actual battle (since the songs the band played were synced up with various marching orders).

In this way, military bands become a metonym for war itself, and this is why the speaker tells the drums and bugles to "burst like a ruthless force" into everyday life. Calling out to these instruments, the speaker tells them to "beat" and "blow" without hesitation, urging them to disrupt the smooth functioning of society. All this apostrophe adds urgency and intensity to the poem.

The poem's apostrophe also blends into personification, especially at the poem's end.
The speaker talks to the instruments as if they're human, saying:

> Mind not the timid—mind not the weeper or prayer,
> Mind not the old man beseeching the young man,

The phrase "mind not" implies that the instruments are capable of *thinking*, an idea that imbues them with a sense of personal agency. The apostrophe in "Beat! Beat! Drums!" therefore suggests that war has a mind of its own—a mind that doesn't care at all about the smooth functioning of society.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!"
- **Line 2:** "burst like a ruthless force,"
- **Line 5:** "Leave not the bridegroom quiet"
- **Line 7:** "So fierce you whirr and pound you drums—so shrill you bugles blow."
- **Line 8:** "Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!"
- **Line 14:** "Then rattle quicker, heavier drums—you bugles wilder blow."
- **Lines 15-19:** "Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow! / Make no parley—stop for no expostulation, / Mind not the timid—mind not the weeper or prayer, / Mind not the old man beseeching the young man, / Let not the child's voice be heard"
- **Lines 20-21:** "Make even the trestles to shake the dead where they lie awaiting the hearses, / So strong you thump O terrible drums—so loud you bugles blow."

CAESURA

The caesuras in "Beat! Beat! Drums!" add yet more intensity to certain moments in the poem. The refrain, for example, features no less than five caesuras:

> Beat! || beat! || drums!— || blow! || bugles! || blow!

Each of these caesuras is marked by an exclamation point, giving the opening line of the poem a very enthusiastic, almost alarming tone. The fact that every word in this line is separated by a caesura also gives the language a staccato flow that mimics the sound of harsh drumbeats and blasting bugle horns.

Elsewhere, though, the caesuras simply slow down the speaker's words. This is the case in line 11, in which the speaker uses two caesuras:

> No bargainers' bargains by day— || no brokers or speculators— || would they continue?

This makes the poem sound slightly more controlled and measured, especially since the lines lack metrical consistency (the poem is, after all, written in free verse). Caesuras therefore add a hint of organization, keeping the language from flying off the rails or spiraling out of control.

And yet, the caesuras don't completely squash the wide-ranging, slightly manic pace of the language—rather, they simply add brief moments of pause, giving the lines a varied, shifting sound that keeps the general feel of the poem fresh and engaging.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Beat! beat!," " drums!," "—blow!," " bugles!," " blow!"
- **Line 2:** "windows—through," "doors—burst"
- **Line 3:** "church, and"
- **Line 5:** "quiet—no"
- **Line 6:** "peace, ploughing"
- **Line 7:** "drums—so"
- **Line 8:** "Beat! beat!," " drums!," "—blow!," " bugles!," " blow!"
- **Line 9:** "cities—over"
- **Line 10:** "houses? n"
- **Line 11:** "day—no," "speculators—would"
- **Line 12:** "talking? would"
- **Line 14:** "quicker, heavier," "drums—you"
- **Line 15:** "Beat! beat!," " drums!," "—blow!," " bugles!," " blow!"
- **Line 16:** "parley—stop"
- **Line 17:** "timid—mind"
- **Line 19:** "heard, nor"
- **Line 21:** "drums—so"

ALLITERATION

The alliteration in "Beat! Beat! Drums!" adds strength and rhythm to the speaker's language. This becomes clear right away, as the speaker repeats the bold /b/ sound in the very first line:

> Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!

Because the /b/ sound is blunt and strong, this line (which is also the poem's refrain) stands out, giving the speaker's language a sense of urgency—the same kind of urgency communicated by the instruments of a military band! The rhythmic repetition of the /b/ sound also recalls the sound of a steady, consistent drumbeat.

Another good example of the poem's alliteration comes in line 6, when the speaker alliterates the /p/, /f/, and /g/ sounds:

> Nor the peaceful farmer any peace, ploughing his
> field or gathering his grain,

The /p/ sound adds a subtly percussive effect to the speaker's words, while the /f/ sound infuses the line with a gentleness that suggests the farmer's peaceful lifestyle. This all leads up to the phrase "gathering his grain." The alliteration throughout simply sounds nice to the ear, creating an image of the pleasant world that war disrupts.

The speaker also blends alliterative sounds in the poem's final line, which features both the sibilant /s/ and the /b/ sound:

> So strong you thump O terrible drums—so loud you
> bugles blow.

The hissing /s/ calls attention to the phrase "so strong," emphasizing the power of the military drums and bugle horns. The alliterative /b/ sound in "bugles blow" also calls attention to this strength. More importantly, though, the repetition of the /b/ gives the poem's final words an extra bump of rhythm, meaning that "Beat! Beat! Drums!" goes out with a bang.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Beat! beat!," "blow! bugles! blow!"
- **Line 2:** "Through the"
- **Line 4:** "school," "scholar," "studying"
- **Line 5:** "happiness," "he," "have"
- **Line 6:** "peaceful," "farmer," "peace, ploughing," "field," "gathering," "grain"
- **Line 7:** "bugles blow"
- **Line 8:** "Beat! beat!," "blow! bugles! blow!"
- **Line 9:** "cities," "streets"
- **Line 10:** "sleepers," "sleep," "beds"
- **Line 11:** "bargainers' bargains by," "brokers"
- **Line 12:** "talkers," "talking," "singer," "sing"
- **Line 13:** "court," "case"
- **Line 14:** "bugles," "blow"
- **Line 15:** "Beat! beat!," "blow! bugles! blow!"
- **Line 18:** "Mind," "man"
- **Line 21:** "So strong," "so," "bugles blow"

SIBILANCE

Like the speaker's use of alliteration, the sibilance in "Beat! Beat! Drums!" adds musicality to the language. It also slightly softens the speaker's otherwise forceful and energetic tone. For example, take lines 3-4:

> Into the solemn church, and scatter the
> congregation,
> Into the school where the scholar is studying

Sibilance is, by its very nature, quiet; you can't be very loud when making an /s/ sound! The sibilance here thus evokes the hushed atmosphere of both the church and the school. This, in turn, makes the loud interruption of the military band seem all the more disruptive.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "solemn," "scatter"
- **Line 4:** "school," "scholar," "studying"
- **Line 10:** "sleepers," "sleepers must sleep"
- **Line 12:** "singer," "sing"
- **Line 16:** "stop," "expostulation"
- **Line 21:** "So strong"

CONSONANCE

Consonance combines with alliteration, sibilance, and assonance to give the speaker's language a rich, musical sound. This is a free verse poem, without any steady meter or rhyme. But its intense use of sonic devices heightens the speaker's language, filling the poem with a sense of urgency and intensity.

Take, for example, line 20, which features the consonant /k/, /s/, and /w/ sounds:

> Make even the trestles to shake the dead where they
> lie awaiting the hearses,

The intense consonance here makes the line sound all the more memorable and urgent for readers. The harsh /k/ sound also pairs with the assonant /a/ sound in "make" and "shake," creating an internal rhyme that adds yet more melody to the poem's language.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Line 3
- Line 4
- Line 5
- Line 6
- Line 7

- Line 8
- Line 9
- Line 10
- Line 11
- Line 12
- Line 13
- Line 14
- Line 15
- Line 16
- Line 17
- Line 18
- Line 19
- Line 20
- Line 21

ASSONANCE

Assonance, much like the effect that alliteration, sibilance, and consonance, adds intensity and musicality to the speaker's language.

Assonance is especially noticeable in the poem's last two lines, in which the speaker repeats the /ay/ and /uh/ sounds alongside the /yoo/ sound that appears in "you bugles":

> Make even the trestles to shake the dead where they lie awaiting the hearses,
> So strong you thump O terrible drums—so loud you bugles blow.

All this assonance sounds satisfying and intense, giving the end of the poem a memorable quality that calls attention to the speaker's heightened emotion (which makes sense, considering that these lines acknowledge the devastating loss of life that comes along with war).

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "through," "doors," "ruthless," "force"
- **Line 5:** "bridegroom," "quiet"
- **Line 6:** "peaceful," "peace," "field"
- **Line 7:** "you bugles"
- **Line 9:** "wheels," "streets"
- **Line 10:** "sleepers," "sleepers," "sleep"
- **Line 11:** "bargainers' bargains"
- **Line 12:** "talkers," "talking," "singer," "sing"
- **Line 13:** "court," "state," "case," "before"
- **Line 14:** "you bugles"
- **Line 16:** "stop," "expostulation"
- **Line 20:** "Make," "shake," "awaiting"
- **Line 21:** "thump," "drums," "you bugles"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

In the poem's second stanza, the speaker strings together several rhetorical questions, all of which imply that nothing in everyday life can go on like normal in the midst of war.

Instead of just stating this outright, the speaker wonders aloud whether certain things in life will "continue" while the instruments of a military band sound the alarm of war. More specifically, the speaker asks:

- if "sleepers" will be able to sleep soundly in otherwise peaceful houses;
- if businesspeople ("bargainers") will be able to keep trading in the marketplaces;
- if people will still be able to talk or sing;
- if lawyers will be able to present their arguments in court.

The speaker wonders if these things can possibly go on uninterrupted while a devastating war takes shape. But these aren't *genuine* questions. Rather, the speaker poses them as a way of making a point—namely, that nothing remains the same in the midst of war.

Simply saying that war overtakes every aspect of daily life would be less dramatic than making this argument using a series of rhetorical questions. These questions invite readers to think for themselves and come to their own conclusions about just how thoroughly war disrupts society. The speaker's use of rhetorical questions therefore makes the poem more engaging, since it forces readers to arrive at the poem's main idea (that war is deeply disruptive) on their own.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-13:** "Are beds prepared for sleepers at night in the houses? no sleepers must sleep in those beds, / No bargainers' bargains by day—no brokers or speculators—would they continue? / Would the talkers be talking? would the singer attempt to sing? / Would the lawyer rise in the court to state his case before the judge?"

POLYPTOTON

One specific form of repetition that the speaker turns to again and again is polyptoton. As with the other examples of repetition in the poem, this return to words with the same root adds an intensity to the speaker's language and reinforces the poem's argument that war disrupts every part of life.

In line 6, for example, the speaker says:

> Nor the peaceful farmer any peace,

The polyptoton here tells readers that this farmer has nothing to do with the fighting—that this person is "peaceful"—but that war will affect them anyway; despite not being a fighter, war

robs the farmer of "peace" itself.

The most intense polyptoton comes in the second stanza:

> Are beds prepared for sleepers at night in the houses? no sleepers must sleep in those beds,
> No bargainers' bargains by day—no brokers or speculators—would they continue?
> Would the talkers be talking? would the singer attempt to sing?

All this repetition drives the speaker's point home again and again that war upends *everything*. Beds might be made for sleeping, but no one will sleep in them; bargainers might be ready to bargain, but no deals will be made. The interruptions of war mean that people can't simply go through the motions of their regular lives—or perhaps even that there is no regular life in wartime.

Where Polyptoton appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "peaceful," "peace"
- **Line 10:** "beds," "sleepers," "sleepers," "sleep," "beds"
- **Line 11:** "bargainers' bargains"
- **Line 12:** "talkers," "talking," "singer," "sing"

VOCABULARY

Bugles (Line 1, Line 7, Line 8, Line 14, Line 15, Line 21) - The bugle horn is a brass instrument similar to the trumpet. They were used in military bands in the Civil War to help deliver marching orders on the battlefield. They were also frequently used in military parades.

Ruthless (Line 2) - Merciless.

Solemn (Line 3) - Serious and formal.

Congregation (Line 3) - A group of religious worshipers.

Bridegroom (Line 5) - A groom in a wedding.

Ploughing (Line 6) - Plowing; the act of turning over soil to bring the ground's rich nutrients to the top layer.

Whirr (Line 7) - A fast, continuous sound.

Shrill (Line 7) - Harsh and loud.

Bargainers (Line 11) - People who make a living by trading or selling wares in a marketplace.

Brokers (Line 11) - Someone who buys or sells goods on behalf of another person.

Speculators (Line 11) - Investors.

Parley (Line 16) - A meeting between enemies to discuss some kind of agreement.

Expostulation (Line 16) - To discuss something or try to dissuade someone from doing something.

Beseeching (Line 18) - Imploring someone to do something.

Entreaties (Line 19) - Requests or pleas.

Trestles (Line 20) - A braced framework used to support something. In this case, the speaker is most likely referring to the makeshift medical tables often used on or near the battlefield in the Civil War, upon which wounded or dead soldiers were set down.

Hearses (Line 20) - Some kind of vehicle used to transport dead bodies to funerals or graves.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Beat! Beat! Drums!" consists of 21 lines divided into three stanzas, each of which contain seven lines. This is not a traditional poetic form, but it does lend the poem a slight sense of order, even if the lines themselves vary in length.

The poem also sounds consistent and somewhat organized because of the speaker's use of the refrain, "Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!", which appears at the beginning of each stanza. This gives the speaker's language a cohesive, ordered sound that lends musicality to the poem. The speaker also uses parallelism in the final line of each stanza, echoing the refrain and further adding to the poem's pleasingly musical quality.

Other than the refrain, the speaker's use of parallelism, and the equal-length stanzas, the only other formal element holding the poem together is the speaker's frequent use of smaller kinds of repetition (like, for instance, anaphora). Taken together, these things give the poem a sense of intensity and urgency without compromising its sprawling, spontaneous character.

METER

Like the majority of Walt Whitman's most famous poems, "Beat! Beat! Drums!" is written in free verse, meaning that it doesn't follow a set metrical pattern and doesn't feature a rhyme scheme. This lack of meter is immediately recognizable in the poem's first two lines, since they both feature such different rhythms.

Line 1 consists of just seven syllables, almost all of which are stressed because of the intense caesuras that separate them. Line 2, on the other hand, contains 12 syllables and a lot more rhythmic variation. Take a look at how different these two lines look from each other:

> Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!
> Through the windows—through the doors—burst like a ruthless force,

Because line 1 contains so many monosyllabic words separated by exclamation points, it has a very forceful, staccato rhythm. But line 2 is much more wide-ranging in its rhythm. This interplay between the opening lines establishes the poem's elastic, constantly changing flow. The poem feels like heightened regular speech rather than stiffly metered verse.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem is written in free verse, so it doesn't follow a rhyme scheme. This *lack* of rhyme gives the language an accessible feel, which makes sense when considering that the speaker is talking about the way that war affects everyday people. The poem finds music in other ways, through poetic devices like repetition, alliteration, consonance, and assonance.

SPEAKER

The poem doesn't contain any identifying information about the speaker. Instead, the speaker is nothing more than a voice calling out to the instruments of a military band. However, the speaker's general outlook on war becomes clear by the end of the poem: the speaker sees war as a profoundly disruptive force, something capable of bringing everything in society to a complete standstill.

The speaker is also seemingly aware of the devastating loss that comes along with war, since the poem's second-to-last line references the many dead soldiers waiting to be loaded into hearses. The speaker, then, is wary of the horrors of war but also believes that everyone should devote their attention to the conflict (and perhaps even enlist in the military). In other words, the speaker stresses the importance of the war but also calls attention to the unfortunate way that it interferes with the smooth functioning of society.

SETTING

"Beat! Beat! Drums!" is a poem about the effect war has on society, and its message could apply to many different time periods. However, it is first and foremost a poem about the beginning of the Civil War.

Walt Whitman wrote the poem shortly after the Battle of Bull Run in 1861—the first year of the Civil War and, as such, a time full of anxiety and tension, as news from the front lines began to reach places like Brooklyn (where Whitman lived). The poem's primary setting, then, is most likely a northern city in which people have begun to realize they can't just go about their daily lives while the Civil War looms over the country.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

One of the most famous American writers of all time, Walt Whitman had an enormous impact on the direction poetry took in the 1800s and beyond. Until the mid-1800s, the majority of poetry was written in metered, rhyming verse. Eager to leave behind the old poetic traditions that came to the United States from Europe, Whitman began writing poems in free verse. His most famous book, *Leaves of Grass*, was first published in 1855 and featured what would become his trademark sprawling poetic style.

"Beat! Beat! Drums!" was written at the very beginning of the Civil War, so it makes sense to consider it alongside other famous Civil War poems—like, for example, "Boston Hymn" by Ralph Waldo Emerson, who had a great influence on Whitman. The poem also shares a certain contextual background with Ethel Lynn Beers's poem "All Quiet Along the Potomac Tonight," which is about the first battle of Bull Run (the same battle that presumably inspired "Beat! Beat! Drums!").

But the *most* famous poetry from the Civil War comes from Walt Whitman himself, as he chronicled the country's descent into conflict. In fact, his poetry traces the trajectory of the entire war: while "Beat! Beat! Drums!" deals with the initial stages of the war, other Whitman poems like "O Captain! My Captain!" and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" center around Abraham Lincoln's assassination and the end of the war. Whitman therefore emerged as a vital poetic voice during the Civil War years and beyond, using his innovative (at the time) free verse poems to write about a turbulent era in American history.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As mentioned above, "Beat! Beat! Drums!" was composed shortly after the First Battle of Bull Run, which took place on July 21, 1861, and was the first major battle of the Civil War. The battle occurred several months after the Battle of Fort Sumner, which was much smaller but marked the official beginning of the war. Bull Run, however, was a much more devastating event, with a total death toll of 868—a shocking number that showed both the Union and the Confederacy the true gravity of the Civil War.

The end result of the Battle of Bull Run—which both sides were relatively unprepared for—was the retreat of Union forces, leaving the Confederate Army with a decisive victory. Walt Whitman no doubt had heard about what happened at Bull Run and (perhaps as a rallying cry) composed "Beat! Beat! Drums!", publishing it in both *Harper's Weekly* and *The New York Leader* on September 28, 1861, mere months after the battle.

Although Whitman himself didn't fight in the Civil War, he believed in the abolition of slavery and was a Union supporter.

He even volunteered in army hospitals as a nurse, though his biggest impact had more to do with the personal connections he made with the wounded soldiers than with any sort of medical expertise. Walking through the wards, he made a point of keeping the patients company as they recovered, eventually writing about the experience in a book called *Memoranda During the War*. Even if he wasn't on the front lines himself, then, it's clear that he supported the Union—suggesting that "Beat! Beat! Drums!" isn't just a comment on the devastating disruption of war, but also a call to arms on behalf of the Union.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to a reading of the poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=25QuaDpkzOA)
- The Bugle Horn — Listen to the sound of the bugle horn and learn about some of the ways it was used on the battlefield in the Civil War! (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=42QGf3W2BZw&t=44s)
- The Poet's Life Story — Learn more about Walt Whitman's life and work. (https://poets.org/poet/walt-whitman)
- Whitman and the Civil War — Read about Walt Whitman's engagement with the Civil War, including his time as a volunteer nurse for wounded Union soldiers. (https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/walt-whitman-and-civil-war/)
- Military Bands in the Civil War — A look at the purpose and practices of military bands in the Civil War. (https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/civil-war-military-bands#:~:text=Bands%20were%20more%20commonly%20us

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WALT WHITMAN POEMS

- A Noiseless Patient Spider
- I Hear America Singing
- O Captain! My Captain!
- The Voice of the Rain
- When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer
- When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd

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