The Rear-Guard

POEM TEXT

(Hindenburg Line, April 1917)

Groping along the tunnel, step by step,
He winked his prying torch with patching glare
From side to side, and sniffed the unwholesome air.

Tins, boxes, bottles, shapes too vague to know;
A mirror smashed, the mattress from a bed;
And he, exploring fifty feet below
The rosy gloom of battle overhead.

Tripping, he grabbed the wall; saw someone lie
Humped at his feet, half-hidden by a rug.
And stooped to give the sleeper's arm a tug.
"I'm looking for headquarters." No reply.
"God blast your neck!" (For days he'd had no sleep.)
"Get up and guide me through this stinking place."
Savage, he kicked a soft, unanswering heap,
And flashed his beam across the livid face
Terribly glaring up, whose eyes yet wore
Agony dying hard of ten days before;
And fists of fingers clutched a blackening wound.

Alone he staggered on until he found
Dawn's ghost that filtered down a shafted stair
To the dazed, muttering creatures underground
Who hear the boom of shells in muffled sound.
At last, with sweat and horror in his hair,
He climbed through darkness to the twilight air,
Unloading hell behind him step by step.

SUMMARY

A rear-guard soldier feels his way through the tunnel one step at a time. He flicks on his flashlight and waves it back and forth, its beam flashing out like an invasive stare, and smells the tunnel's terrible stench.

Various items have been left behind—bottles, containers, other ambiguous shapes that he can't identify in the darkness. There's a shattered mirror and a discarded mattress. While he's exploring this tunnel deep below the ground, the war continues far above.

The soldier trips and reaches out for the wall. He notices a man slumped over by his feet, partially covered by a rug. The soldier bends down to try and wake the sleeping man by pulling on his arm. The soldier asks for directions to headquarters, but when the man doesn't answer, the soldier curses him (he's on edge, having not slept for days). The soldier demands that the man gets up and lead him through the foul-smelling tunnel. Feeling wild, he kicks the soft, silent body, shining his flashlight in its horrible face, which stares up at him. That face still bears the evidence of the horrible, painful death this man suffered ten days ago. The dead man's fingers are balled up over a bloody, festering wound.

The soldier stumbles along on his own until he sees the pale, ghostly light of dawn shining down a stairwell. That stairwell leads to a place where tired and confused soldiers (perhaps ghosts or figment's of the soldier's imagination) can hear the dull explosion of shells on the surface above. Finally, the soldier escapes the tunnels, sweaty and still terrified. He clambers out of the tunnel into the light of early evening, leaving the hellish underground one step at a time.

THEMES

THE HORROR OF WAR

"The Rear-Guard" follows a World War I soldier as he makes his way through a network of underground tunnels while a battle rages on overhead. The soldier's journey is like a descent into "hell," a place filled with the chaos and gruesome destruction left in war's wake. Yet leaving this dark underworld behind just means re-entering the hellish "gloom of battle." In this way, the poem suggests that the horrors of war are inescapable—and that soldiers are forced to press onward in the face of unrelenting death and terror.

The poem's title reveals that this soldier is part of the rear-guard—that is, a group of soldiers tasked with protecting an army from attacks to the rear. As such, this man has a unique perspective on the conflict: he's able to observe the grisly aftermath of earlier fighting (even as battles continue elsewhere).

The journey is difficult and confusing, the sleep-deprived soldier staggering "along the tunnel, step by step" in a way that suggests his isolation and helplessness. He first comes across "Tins, boxes, bottles," broken mirrors, and mattresses—mundane signs of life that have been made eerie and unnerving by their abandonment. These very human objects also might inspire sympathy for the young men trying to survive a hellish situation, subtly reminding readers of the

individual lives at stake in war.

Then, in a disturbing scene that depicts the brutality of war, the soldier encounters a festering corpse. The dead man's face still wears the "Agony of dying" days earlier and his fingers are so bloated that they look like fists clutching at a blackened wound. Yet, whether it's because he can't see well in the darkness or is losing his grip on reality (or both), the soldier asks this corpse for directions to "headquarters" and curses the dead man when he gets no reply. The soldier is clearly desperate for some sense of order and guidance, which the poem suggests is nowhere to be found amidst war's chaos. The soldier then "savage[ly]" kicks the rotting body, seemingly spurred toward his own act of irrational violence by war's irrational violence.

The soldier finally is able to climb out of the tunnel in the poem's end, but there's no sense of relief upon reaching the surface. The "horror" of what he has seen deep underground clings to his body, suggesting the lasting trauma of war. And though he leaves the "hell" of the tunnels "behind him step by step," the poem's ending offers no false comforts: the soldier is re-entering the "rosy gloom of battle," trading the "hell" below for the one above.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-25

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

Groping along the tunnel, step by step,
He winked his prying torch with patching glare
From side to side, and sniffed the unwholesome air.

Before the poem begins, Sassoon indicates that this was written and/or is set along the "Hindenburg Line" in April of 1917. This refers to a long German defense system in western Europe during World War I.

The setting established, the poem drops the reader right in the middle of the action: a soldier is clumsily making his way through a dark tunnel. The lack of specifics—who this man is, or the nature of his mission—might leave the reader a bit disoriented, much like the soldier himself! Indeed, it's not clear if the soldier knows exactly what he's supposed to be doing. He feels his way through the underground, gripping the walls and inching along "step by step," the diacope of the phrase giving the poem a slow, tentative feel.

His torch (a.k.a flashlight) illuminates patches of the stuffy darkness. The speaker personifies that torch, referring to it as a kind of "prying" eye "glar[ing]" into the tunnel:

> He winked his prying torch with patching glare
> From side to side, and sniffed the unwholesome air.

The torch seems to be the only sign of life down there, and that "prying [...] glare" suggests that it's uncovering things that shouldn't really be (or don't want to be) seen. The enjambment between these lines also makes it feel like the poem itself is probing the darkness, trying to find its way.

Notice, too, how the diacope of "side to side" mirrors "step by step" from line 1. Again, this makes the soldier's actions seem tentative, as though he isn't really sure what to do or which way to go. One thing's clear, though: it *stinks* down there. Young men have been living there for days, weeks, or even months on end—and, as will be revealed later in the poem, there are also dead and decaying bodies nearby. The poem doesn't need to do too much with its imagery here—just noting that the air is "unwholesome" suggests something horrendous, something deeply wrong, has happened here.

LINES 4-7

Tins, boxes, bottles, shapes too vague to know;
A mirror smashed, the mattress from a bed;
And he, exploring fifty feet below
The rosy gloom of battle overhead.

In the second stanza, the soldier discovers some signs of recent life: items that the soldiers who previously occupied these tunnels left behind. There's something eerie about these objects, in that they suggest the *presence* of people even as there's a distinct *absence* of actual people in the tunnel. It's like the tunnel is haunted by the soldiers who have since moved on to more battle (or, just as likely, have died).

These lines are filled with alliteration ("boxes"/"bottles," "mirror"/"smashed"/"mattress") and assonance ("boxes"/"bottles," "shapes"/"vague," "smashed"/"mattress"):

> Tins, boxes, bottles, shapes too vague to know;
> A mirror smashed, the mattress from a bed;

The intensity of the sounds here evokes just how overwhelming this scene is—just how *much* stuff has been left behind. The asyndeton in these two lines (that is, the lack of any conjunction words like "and") also makes it feel like these items are coming at the soldier quick and fast. Altogether, these devices emphasize the chaos that war has left in its wake.

The speaker then gives readers a bit more context, revealing that the soldier is deep underground while a battle continues to rage on far above him:

> And he, exploring fifty feet below
> The rosy gloom of battle overhead.

The striking phrase "rosy gloom" sounds like an oxymoron: "rosy" usually means cheerful and happy, while "gloom" refers

to dreariness and darkness. But here, that rosiness takes on a sinister quality—perhaps evoking blood or flames. The phrase suggests there's thus no escape for this soldier: even if he escapes the hellish underworld in which he currently finds himself, he'll just be returning to the hellish world of the battlefield.

LINES 8-13

Tripping, he grabbed the wall; saw someone lie
Humped at his feet, half-hidden by a rug.
And stooped to give the sleeper's arm a tug.
"I'm looking for headquarters." No reply.
"God blast your neck!" (For days he'd had no sleep.)
"Get up and guide me through this stinking place."

The speaker continues to stumble along through the dark tunnels, gripping at the wall. He then encounters a corpse. The soldier is so confused and sleep-deprived, however, that he doesn't initially realize that the man is dead.

The asyndeton between "wall" and "saw" makes the line feel fragmented and abrupt, in turn evoking the soldier's jerky movements and disoriented state. The alliteration across line 9 seems to capture the body's lifelessness, the breathy /h/ sounds of "humped" and "half-hidden" lending the line a dull, muffled feel.

In his desperate, half-crazed state, the soldier tries to speak to the corpse. He bends down low and yank's at the body's arm (the speaker calls the body "the sleeper" in reference to the fact that the soldier thinks this person is just asleep rather than dead).

The soldier curtly demands that "the sleeper" guide him to "headquarters"—a request that reveals the soldier's desire for some kind of order and clarity. The corpse, of course, can't respond, implying that there is no order to be found amidst the horror and chaos of war.

Note how the speaker uses heavy caesura and end-stopping throughout these lines, lending the poem a slow, plodding feel. Each of those clear end-stops evokes the silence that follows the soldier's futile attempts at communication:

Humped at his feet, half-hidden by a rug.
And stooped to give the sleeper's arm a tug.
"I'm looking for headquarters." No reply.
"God blast your neck!" (For days he'd had no sleep.)
"Get up and guide me through this stinking place."

Each silence highlights the lifelessness of the corpse *and* the dazed mindset of the soldier. His mind has been so ravaged by war to the extent that he curses a corpse for being unresponsive!

The speaker's desire for a guide out of this hellish underground tunnel system also subtly alludes to both classical mythology and the 14th-century Italian writer Dante:

- In ancient Greek myth, a boatman ("Charon") ferries the newly deceased across the river Styx, which separates the world of the living from the world of the dead.
- When the Italian poet, Dante, visits Hell in his *Inferno*, it's with the Roman poet Virgil as his guide.

There is a long literary tradition, then, of guided tours around the underworld! Here, though, there is no such luxury. This is *real life*, and the all-too-real horrors of war make things like myth seem trivial and misplaced. There is no guide for the soldier, because, in reality, this war is chaotic, confusing, and absurd.

It's also worth noting that the poem *doesn't* identify the dead body here—it could be a casualty on *either* side of the war. The soldier treats the corpse as an ally (by asking him for directions), but the whole episode seems essentially pointless. The corpse can't answer, and the soldier can't get the information he needs.

LINES 14-18

Savage, he kicked a soft, unanswering heap,
And flashed his beam across the livid face
Terribly glaring up, whose eyes yet wore
Agony dying hard of ten days before;
And fists of fingers clutched a blackening wound.

In lines 14 to 18, the soldier grows frustrated with the corpse's silence and kicks the body. The poem describes the soldier as "Savage" at this moment. In other words, he's acting fiercely, violently, and wildly. "Savage" can also mean uncivilized, and the word thus suggests that war has made the soldier revert to his animalistic, brutish instincts. The soldier's kick is also just absurd; he's kicking a man who's already dead. And the senselessness of this action might speak to the senselessness of war more generally.

The soldier then shines his flashlight in the corpse's face, which seems to stare back at him. It wears a permanent look of fear, horror, and agony, essentially preserving the man's emotions from the moment he died "ten days before." This moment puts a human face on the brutal cost of war.

At the same time, however, the poem never reveals any details about this man apart from the "agony" he felt when he died. There's no sense of the man's personality or even which side he fought on: he's just a piece of meat that has been put through the meat-grinder of WWI.

In line 18, the poem deploys a grim, unsettling metaphor. Looking closer at the dead man, the soldier sees "fists of fingers clutched" around a rotting wound. The hand is so swollen and putrid that the fingers no longer resemble fingers, but, perversely, fists. This further dehumanizes the dead man, the

poem's imagery sparing the reader no horrific detail. And the alliterating /f/ sounds in "fists of fingers" add extra emphasis to the gruesomeness of what's being described.

LINES 19-22

Alone he staggered on until he found
Dawn's ghost that filtered down a shafted stair
To the dazed, muttering creatures underground
Who hear the boom of shells in muffled sound.

Leaving the corpse behind, the soldier stumbles on alone until he comes upon a "shafted stair" (basically, a vertical stairwell) leading to ground level. A small amount of morning light is able to "filter[]" down through this passage, beckoning the soldier upwards.

Yet the speaker calls this pale, early light "Dawn's ghost," making it seem more frightening than hopeful. On one level, this metaphor just describes how the light looks as it filters down into the darkness. At the same time, the mention of a "ghost" suggests that moving towards this light won't actually free the soldier from the darkness of the tunnels. Instead, it just leads to more death (perhaps because it leads to the "battle overhead" mentioned back in line 7).

The light finds its way to "the dazed, muttering creatures underground." These might be other soldiers, so physically and psychologically ravaged by war that they are barely human any longer; they're *creatures*, not men. They might also be ghosts or simply figments of the exhausted soldier's imagination, come to haunt him as he tries to escape this underworld.

Whatever they really are, they are confused and incoherent. They "hear the boom of shells" on the surface above, muffled by the earth that lies between them and the battle. In lines 21 and 22, dull /d/ consonance capture the noise of explosions at ground level:

> To the dazed, muttering creatures underground
> Who hear the boom of shells in muffled sound.

It's as though the line itself is packed full of far-off artillery shells.

LINES 23-25

At last, with sweat and horror in his hair,
He climbed through darkness to the twilight air,
Unloading hell behind him step by step.

In the poem's last three lines, the soldier escapes the tunnel system and makes it to the surface. Yet the "At last" in line 23 doesn't really feel all that hopeful "At last" usually implies something has been achieved or completed, but the soldier is just swapping one section of the war for another.

Things were horrible in the darkness of the tunnel, but the poem has already established that the "rosy gloom of battle" is still happening above ground. Just as the poem began *in media res* (in the middle of the action), it thus ends without any real satisfactory conclusion. The soldier makes it out, sure—but what happens then is unspecified, and he's hardly safe just for having made it to the surface. In reality, he's probably about to join the conflict above ground, which is equally, if not more, terrifying than the tunnels below.

In these lines, the poem also stresses the long-lasting effects of war on those who fight it. The soldier emerges "with sweat and horror in his hair" (line 23), as though the terrifying things he's seen cling to him like a bodily odor. The alliteration of "horror in his hair" has a breathy quality, perhaps giving the poem a panicky tone that speaks to the soldier's state of mind.

The last line of the poem is ambiguous. The speaker says that as the soldier climbs up and out of the tunnels, he's also "Unloading hell behind him step by step." This line might mean a few things:

- Perhaps, as a rear-guard soldier, the man has been tasked with destroying the tunnel he's now exiting, and he's leaving behind explosives in order to do so. In this sense, "hell" could refer to the fire and destruction he leaves in his wake.
- Yet this line can be read entirely differently! Perhaps he unloads hell in the sense that sheds the burden of the underground like a weight off his shoulders.

This second interpretation is cruelly ironic: the soldier might be unloading one hell, but he's also walking toward another. The repetition of "step by step," which appeared in the very first line (and uses diacope), suggests that sadly little has changed—or will change. The soldier, like the war itself, will drag on step after tired step.

SYMBOLS

THE SOLDIERS' POSSESSIONS

In the second stanza, the soldier stumbles on a variety of objects used by the men who, until recently, occupied the tunnel:

> Tins, boxes, bottles, shapes too vague to know;
> A mirror smashed, the mattress from a bed;

On the one hand, these are signs of life that symbolize the young soldiers' basic humanity. Tins, boxes, bottles, and so on—these are all personal possessions that soldiers would have had with them while serving in the war. They might have contained food rations or, in the bottles' case, alcohol to numb the emotional toll of warfare. The mirror might have been

useful for seeing approaching enemies, or even for a soldier to fix up his hair! The mattress, of course, would have been there for rest. These objects thus symbolize the everyday presence of people in the tunnel.

But that's the thing: there's no one in the tunnel anymore to use these objects, which seem to have been left behind quickly and haphazardly. The mattress is on the ground and the mirror is "smashed." The objects thus don't just represent the human presence of soldiers, but also the destruction and chaos that war leaves in its wake.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "Tins, boxes, bottles, shapes too vague to know; / A mirror smashed, the mattress from a bed;"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

The poem uses alliteration to create dramatic moments and bring images to life on the page. The crisp /p/ sounds of line 2, for example, are loud and intrusive—much like the "prying" eye of the soldier's flashlight:

> He winked his prying torch with patching glare

And in the next line, the sibilance of "side to side, and sniffed" (and also "unwholesome," which isn't alliterative but uses the same sound) has a breathy quality that evokes the action being described.

Soon after, the soldier chances upon numerous abandoned objects left behind in the tunnel:

> Tins, boxes, bottles, shapes too vague to know;
> A mirror smashed, the mattress from a bed;

The intensity of the sounds here matches the intensity of the experience. The soldier keeps stumbling across things, and the poetic *noise* of the alliteration evokes the sudden discovery of objects. (Note how assonance adds to this sense of being overwhelmed by stuff as well, with the shared vowel sounds of "shapes"/"vague" and "smashed"/"mattress.")

Alliteration also calls attention to and heightens the poem's more gruesome imagery, as with the /f/ sounds in line 18's "fists of fingers." And in line 23, the soldier emerges from the tunnel with "horror in his hair"—those breathless /h/ sounds connoting fear and fatigue.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "prying," "patching"
- **Line 3:** "side," "side," "sniffed"
- **Line 4:** "boxes, bottles"
- **Line 5:** "mirror smashed," "mattress"
- **Line 6:** "fifty feet"
- **Line 8:** "saw someone"
- **Line 9:** "Humped," "half-hidden"
- **Line 10:** "stooped," "sleeper's"
- **Line 13:** "Get," "guide"
- **Line 14:** "Savage," "soft"
- **Line 18:** "fists," "fingers"
- **Line 23:** "horror," "his hair"
- **Line 25:** "hell," "him"

ALLUSION

With its main character going on a dark journey through "hell," the poem subtly alludes to past literary depictions of journeys into the underworld.

For one thing, the soldier here recalls Orpheus: a legendary poet and musician who, according to Greek myth, traveled into the underworld to retrieve his wife, Eurydice. (The connection between Orpheus and the soldier becomes stronger if one takes the soldier to represent the poet, Sassoon, himself.) Hades, the god of the underworld, told Orpheus that he could bring Eurydice back to the world of the living with him provided that he not look back at her while they were making the journey. Orpheus lost faith just before leaving the underworld behind, however, and turned to check that she was still there. In doing so, he lost Eurydice for good.

The allusion is subtle, but it emphasizes the futility and loneliness of the soldier's journey. Both men return to the world above empty-handed. Unlike Orpheus, however, the soldier never finds what he's looking for in the first place.

There's also a deep literary tradition of visits to the underworld accompanied by some kind of *guide*. Also in Greek myth, for example, the boatman Charon leads newly deceased souls across the river Styx (which separates the land of the living from the underworld of the dead). And in Dante's *Inferno*, the poet is guided by Virgil (an ancient Roman poet) through the various circles of hell.

"The Rear-Guard" subtly nods to this literary history in its third stanza when the soldier encounters a festering corpse:

> "Get up and guide me through this stinking place."

The allusion actually highlights the fact that this poem is *not* set in the world of myth or legend. The soldier *wants* a guide, but this is real-life, and no such luxury is available to him. War isn't some grand, mythic adventure, the poem suggests, but rather a chaotic, terrifying journey that the soldier makes alone.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 13:** ""Get up and guide me through this stinking place.""
- **Line 25:** "Unloading hell behind him step by step."

ASYNDETON

The poem uses asyndeton to evoke the chaos and disorder left in war's wake. For example, take a look at how the device works in lines 4-5:

> Tins, boxes, bottles, shapes too vague to know;
> A mirror smashed, the mattress from a bed;

Here, asyndeton makes this feel like a kind of moment-by-moment account of what the soldier discovers. A conjunction like "and" would probably feel too neat and tidy at this point in the poem. The reader effectively *finds* these objects together with the poem's main character. Compressing so many different objects into a small space on the page also shows just how *much* human detritus there is lying in the tunnel!

Asyndeton pops up again in lines 8-9:

> Tripping, he grabbed the wall; saw someone lie
> Humped at his feet, half-hidden by a rug.

The lack of an "and" between "wall" and "saw" makes the line feel a little clunky, which mirrors the soldier's own cumbersome movements through the tunnel. It's as though the sentence is almost tripping over itself.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-5:** "Tins, boxes, bottles, shapes too vague to know; / A mirror smashed, the mattress from a bed;"
- **Lines 8-9:** "he grabbed the wall; saw someone lie / Humped at his feet,"

CAESURA

The poet uses caesura to grant the lines an uncertain, unpredictable motion that mirrors the soldier's halting journey. He can barely see where he's going—and doesn't really seem to have a clear mission—and caesura prevents the poem from building too much steady momentum. This effect is noticeable right away:

> Groping along the tunnel, step by step,
> He winked his prying torch with patching glare

Notice how the caesura makes the poem seem slow and tentative, evoking the "step by step" movement of the soldier through the tunnel. This intentional clunkiness appears throughout the poem, as in line 8—which features not just one but who caesurae:

> Tripping, he grabbed the wall; saw someone lie

Caesura works with end-stops to evoke the soldier's fraught mental state as he attempts to communicate with a corpse:

> "I'm looking for headquarters." No reply.
> "God blast your neck!" (For days he'd had no sleep.)

These caesurae create brief pauses that stand in for the corpse's (understandable!) lack of response. In doing so, they also evoke how the soldier is utterly alone.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "tunnel, step"
- **Line 3:** "side, and"
- **Line 5:** "smashed, the"
- **Line 6:** "he, exploring"
- **Line 8:** "Tripping, he," "wall; saw"
- **Line 9:** "feet, half-hidden"
- **Line 11:** "headquarters." No"
- **Line 12:** "neck!" (For"
- **Line 14:** "Savage, he," "soft, unanswering"
- **Line 16:** "up, whose"
- **Line 21:** "dazed, muttering"
- **Line 23:** "last, with"

CONSONANCE

Like alliteration, consonance adds emphasis and intensity to "The Rear-Guard." For example, in line 2, the /p/ and /ch/ sounds of "prying torch with patching glare" suggest the harshness of the soldier's flashlight as it "pries" into the darkness.

Much of the consonance here is more specifically sibilance, which helps to evoke the soldier's solitude and eerie quiet of the tunnel. Listen to all the hushed sounds when the soldier encounters the corpse, for example:

> Tripping, he grabbed the wall; saw someone lie
> Humped at his feet, half-hidden by a rug.
> And stooped to give the sleeper's arm a tug.
> [...]
> "Get up and guide me through this stinking place."
> Savage, he kicked a soft, unanswering heap,

The whispery, hissing sounds of these lines remind the reader that, down there in the tunnel, it is deadly quiet.

And in line 18, listen to how the mixture of muffled /f/, oozing /l/, and sharp /k/ sounds of "fists of fingers clutched a

blackening wound" draw readers' attention to the gruesome image of the dead man's hand clasped over his rotting injury.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "prying," "torch," "patching"
- **Line 3:** "side," "side," "sniffed," "unwholesome"
- **Line 4:** "boxes, bottles"
- **Line 5:** "mirror smashed," "mattress from"
- **Line 6:** "fifty feet," "below"
- **Line 7:** "gloom," "battle"
- **Line 8:** "saw someone"
- **Line 9:** "Humped," "half-hidden"
- **Line 10:** "stooped," "sleeper's"
- **Line 13:** "this stinking place."
- **Line 14:** "Savage," "soft, unanswering"
- **Line 18:** "fists," "fingers," "clutched," "blackening"
- **Line 20:** "Dawn's," "filtered down," "shafted"
- **Line 21:** "dazed"
- **Line 22:** "boom," "shells," "muffled"
- **Line 23:** "horror," "his hair"
- **Line 25:** "Unloading hell"

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment and end-stopping work hand in hand to control the poem's momentum. The soldier is on a pretty monotonous, straightforward journey, and frequent end-stops create a plodding rhythm that reflects the toil and drudgery of the soldier's trek. Enjambment, by contrast, briefly speeds the poem up, ramping up its pace at moments of heightened tension and even evoking the soldier's movements themselves. Take line 2, where the enjambment after "glare" pushes readers into the blank space of the page, perhaps subtly mimicking the way the soldier's flashlight "pries" into the surrounding darkness.

Sometimes enjambment evokes the soldier's disorientation in the darkness, as in:

> Tripping, he grabbed the wall; saw someone lie
> Humped at his feet, half-hidden by a rug.

That "Humped" is all the more clunky and surprising because of the enjambment of line 8, which pushes readers swiftly across the linebreak and right into that crumpled body by the soldier's feet. And the enjambment toward the poem's end builds up a sense of drama—one that's appropriate for the moment the soldier casts his light on the corpse's face and then finally comes across a means of escape from the tunnel:

> And flashed his beam across the livid face
> Terribly glaring up, whose eyes yet wore
> Agony dying hard of ten days before;
> [...]
> Alone he staggered on until he found
> Dawn's ghost that filtered down a shafted stair
> To the dazed, muttering creatures underground
> Who hear the boom of shells in muffled sound.

It's also worth noting that the long string of end-stopping in lines 9 to 14 stands out all the more clearly because the rest of the poem features a pretty natural mixture of enjambed and end-stopped lines:

> Humped at his feet, half-hidden by a rug.
> And stooped to give the sleeper's arm a tug.
> "I'm looking for headquarters." No reply.
> "God blast your neck!" (For days he'd had no sleep.)
> "Get up and guide me through this stinking place."

In these lines, the *lack* of enjambment evokes the corpse's non-responsiveness, creating long silences that emphasize just how isolated the soldier really is.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "glare / From"
- **Lines 6-7:** "below / The"
- **Lines 8-9:** "lie / Humped"
- **Lines 15-16:** "face / Terribly"
- **Lines 16-17:** "wore / Agony"
- **Lines 19-20:** "found / Dawn's"
- **Lines 20-21:** "stair / To"
- **Lines 21-22:** "underground / Who"

IMAGERY

The poem uses vivid imagery to capture the horror of the underground world through which the soldier makes his way. With a few choice details, the poem's imagery conjures up a frightening, unsettling atmosphere.

In the first stanza, for example, the mention of the "prying torch" with its "patching glare" moving from "side to side" evokes just how dark and eerie the tunnel is; the light from the soldier's torch doesn't fully illuminate his surroundings all at once but rather casts a harsh, "patchy" glow as the speaker waves it around. And the speaker only has to describe the air as "unwholesome" for the reader to know that it must smell terrible down there. The tunnel lacks fresh air, and soldiers have been living in it for weeks and even months!

When the soldier stumbles upon a corpse, the poem shifts to more direct, gruesome imagery. The dead man has a "livid face"—meaning both frozen in anger and a kind of bluish-gray tone—while his fingers are so swollen from putrefaction they look more like fists. His wound is "blackening," too. These grim details shock the reader, bringing the horrors of war to life on the page.

Down there in the tunnel, soldiers can hear "the boom of shells in muffled sound" (line 22). This auditory imagery reminds readers that there is a "hell" above the "hell" in which the soldier currently finds himself. In other words, there's no escape from the horror of war.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** "He winked his prying torch with patching glare / From side to side, and sniffed the unwholesome air."
- **Line 7:** "The rosy gloom of battle overhead."
- **Lines 14-18:** "Savage, he kicked a soft, unanswering heap, / And flashed his beam across the livid face / Terribly glaring up, whose eyes yet wore / Agony dying hard of ten days before; / And fists of fingers clutched a blackening wound."
- **Lines 19-24:** "Alone he staggered on until he found / Dawn's ghost that filtered down a shafted stair / To the dazed, muttering creatures underground / Who hear the boom of shells in muffled sound. / At last, with sweat and horror in his hair, / He climbed through darkness to the twilight air,"

METAPHOR

"The Rear-Guard" uses a handful of metaphors, starting with the personification of the soldier's flashlight in line 2:

> Groping along the tunnel, step by step,
> He winked his prying torch with patching glare
> From side to side, and sniffed the unwholesome air.

The flashlight becomes a kind of character investigating the darkness. That the torch is "prying" implies that it's illuminating things that don't want to be seen. The metaphor thus subtly brings the entire world of the tunnel to sinister life, suggesting that the darkness is something that should stay hidden.

Later in the poem, the soldier encounters a festering corpse, mistaking it for a live human being. The dead man has metaphorical "fists of fingers," his body in such a dire state of composition that his individual digits look more like entire fists. This metaphor is meant to shock the reader and foreground the bodily horror of war.

When the soldier nears the surface, he finds "Dawn's ghost." This is a metaphor for the pale light filtering down a stair shaft into the tunnel. "Dawn" usually connotes hope and new beginnings, but this dawn light isn't welcoming or rejuvenating. Instead, it's a kind of phantom. It's as though the dawn itself has been diminished by what it's had to witness during the war and no longer arrives with the same hopeful spirit.

Finally, the phrase "Unloading hell behind him step by step" metaphorically casts the tunnel itself as "hell." The soldier is leaving this "hell" behind him with each step he takes out of the tunnel.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "He winked his prying torch with patching glare"
- **Line 18:** "fists of fingers clutched a blackening wound."
- **Line 20:** "Dawn's ghost that filtered down a shafted stair"
- **Line 25:** "Unloading hell behind him step by step."

DIACOPE

"The Rear-Guard" uses diacope three separate times. In each instance, the device evokes the soldier's tentative movements as he makes his way through the tunnel.

Take the diacope of stanza 1, highlight below:

> Groping along the tunnel, step by step,
> He winked his prying torch with patching glare
> From side to side, and sniffed the unwholesome air.

The soldier moves forward one step at a time, the repeated "step" mimicking this motion (literally, one step following after another). The "side to side" movement of the flashlight mirrors this grammatical construction, showing how, in truth, the soldier really doesn't know where he's going: he can only puzzle out the tunnel piece by badly-lit piece.

Though the soldier does make it out of the tunnel eventually, there is little sense of resolution or achievement. The first and last lines both end with the "step by step" phrase, suggesting that, ultimately, little has been accomplished throughout the poem. Repetition, quite literally, ends the poem back where it started, implying a kind of circularity and futility, as if the whole underground journey (and perhaps the war itself) was essentially pointless.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "step by step"
- **Line 3:** "side to side"
- **Line 25:** "step by step"

VOCABULARY

Groping (Line 1) - Grabbing/fumbling.

Winked (Line 2) - Flashed on and off.

Prying (Line 2) - Snooping/investigating.

Torch (Line 2) - Flashlight.

Patching glare (Line 2) - The speaker is saying that light from the soldier's torch is intermittent and patchy rather than strong

and clear.

Unwholesome (Line 3) - Unpleasant/sickly.

Beam (Line 15) - The light from the torch.

Livid (Line 15) - Can mean furious or dark bluish gray; both meanings work here.

Yet (Line 16) - Still.

Shafted stair (Line 20) - A stairwell dug into the earth.

Shells (Line 22) - Artillery bombs.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Rear-Guard" doesn't use a standard poetic form. Instead, its 21 lines are broken up into four stanzas of different lengths:

- The poem opens with a tercet (a.k.a. a three-line stanza);
- Next up is a quatrain (a.k.a. a four-line stanza);
- After that is a much longer eleven-line stanza;
- And the poem finally closes with a septet (a seven-line stanza).

This erratic, unpredictable shape mirrors the aimless absurdity of the soldier's journey. That is, he's fumbling around in the dark without much sense of a plan, and the poem seems to reflect this disorganization in its form itself. The stanza breaks are almost like little surprises, the equivalent of the poem bumping into something in the dark.

METER

"The Rear-Guard" is written using iambic pentameter. An iamb is a poetic foot with an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern, while pentameter just means there are five of these iambs (five da-DUMs) per line.

The iambs here create a plodding momentum. At the same time, there are plenty of other feet substituted into the poem. Here's the meter of the first few lines, for example, where readers can already see variations tossed into this metrical pattern:

> Groping | along | the tun- | nel, step | by step,
> He winked | his pry- | ing torch | with patch- | ing glare
> From side | to side, | and sniffed | the unwhole- | some air.

The first foot of line 1 is a trochee (stressed-unstressed, "Gro**p**ing"), opening the poem on a forceful, stumbling note. The fourth foot of line 3, meanwhile, is an anapest (unstressed-unstressed-stressed, "the un**whole**-"), adding another little blip or stumble into the poem's rhythm.

A perfectly iambic rhythm would probably feel too confident and sure-footed for a poem about a soldier stumbling around a dark tunnel. It makes sense, then, that the poem is filled with substitutions like those mentioned above. Readers might think of each little variation as a kind of poetic bump in the dark, as in lines 8 and 9:

> Tripping, | he grabbed | the wall; | saw some- | one lie
> Humped at | his feet, | half-hid-| den by | a rug.

Notice how line 8, like line 1, starts with a trochee. The poem thus seems to trip over itself (right when the soldier trips!). Likewise, the trochee of "Humped at" creates a heavy (and surprising) stress that mirrors the discovery of the dead weight of a corpse.

In this soldier's journey, then, there is a kind of forward momentum, but it doesn't feel particularly focused. He's sleep-deprived, stumbling through the dark, and speaking to corpses, and this erratic behavior is reflected by the meter.

RHYME SCHEME

While "The Rear-Guard" uses plenty of rhyme, those rhymes are unpredictable to the point of seeming random and arbitrary. That is, there's rhyme, but no steady *rhyme scheme*. For example, take a look at the rhyme patterns in the first 11 lines:

> ABB CDCD EFFE

This unpredictable use of rhyme seems to capture the soldier's strange mix of purpose and aimlessness. The soldier is trying to get somewhere, but it's not really clear where or why. Likewise, the presence of rhyme suggests an *attempted* poetic direction that struggles to find its way.

Zoom out, however, and there's an interesting pattern between the beginning and end of the poem. The phrase "step by step" both opens and closes things. The first line is also followed by a rhyming couplet ("glare"/"air"), and this *same* sound occurs in the two lines before the last ("hair"/"air"). There's thus a mirroring effect between the first and the final three lines of the poem:

> ABB ... BBA

This mirroring suggests circularity—that the soldier ends right where he began. This makes sense on a thematic level: the soldier might be exiting the tunnel at the poem's end, but he's just entering another "hell": that of the battlefield above ground. He hasn't really left the tunnel behind him either, as its "horror" clings to his body. The poem's rhyme thus subtly reflects the way that the traumas of war stick to soldiers.

SPEAKER

The speaker in this poem is an omniscient narrator describing a soldier's journey through an underground tunnel during the First World War. The speaker acts as a kind of anonymous voyeur while also commenting on the soldier's state of mind, as with the parenthetical "(For days he'd had no sleep)" in line 12 and the adjective "Savage" in line 14. It's clear the speaker is not actually with the soldier, and that readers are witnessing the behavior of someone who is utterly alone.

All that said, it's fair to see both the speaker and the soldier as a version of Sassoon himself. The epigraph situates the poem on along the Hindenburg line—a long stretch of defensive infrastructure on the Western Front—where Sassoon served during WWI. His diaries recount similar experiences to those outlined in the poem.

SETTING

"The Rear-Guard" is set during the First World War—in fact, it appears to have been written there too! The epigraph—*"(Hindenburg Line, April 1917)"*—tells the reader two important, more specific things about the setting:

- The soldier's journey takes place in April 1917, at which point the war had already been underway for nearly three years (with much bloody fighting still to come). The war had dragged on for far longer than anyone expected, and there is a palpable sense of fatigue in the poem that seems befitting of the date.
- The tunnel through which the soldier makes his way is part of the Hindenburg Line, a long stretch of German defensive infrastructure which stretched along the Western Front (the section of the war taking place in Western Europe).

The poem begins with little context other than the epigraph; there's no real sense of an objective (e.g., where the soldier is trying to get to, or why). Instead, the poem presents a disturbing underground world that is eerily quiet and isolating. There are signs of other soldiers in the second stanza, but the tunnel seems totally deserted now. This *lack* of life highlights the brutal, rapidly-shifting nature of the war; what was recently a hive of activity has become a kind of haunted underworld. And the battle still rages on overhead, its explosions reduce to "muffled sound" to the soldier's ears deep underground.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Siegfried Sassoon was one of the most famous poets of the First First World War. Sassoon's poetry is renowned for its brutal honesty as well as its technical skill. Unlike more jingoistic poets like Rupert Brooke and Jessie Pope, Sassoon felt that war poetry ought to reflect the *reality* of war rather than some idealized, romantic vision of it. Sassoon's close friend and fellow poet, Wilfred Owen, shared this view, and between them, they wrote some of the war's most powerful and enduring poetry. (Indeed, Sassoon's encouragement was critical in Owen finding the confidence to write.)

This poem was published in Sassoon's 1918 collection *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*. This was an influential book that contains some of Sassoon's best-known works, including "Counter-Attack," and "Base Details." The poems in this collection, including "The Rear-Guard," were largely based on Sassoon's own wartime experiences. He did indeed serve on the Hindenburg Line mentioned in this poem's epigraph, and his diaries chronicle situations similar to those described in "The Rear-Guard." Sassoon also had a reputation for immense—and sometimes reckless—bravery during his time in the war, earning him the nickname "Mad Jack."

"The Rear-Guard" also subtly nods to long literary tradition of poetic journeys through the underworld. In ancient Greek mythology, for example, Charon guides newly deceased souls through the underworld to the afterlife. Orpheus is another character drawn from Greek myth: a legendary poet and musician who journeys to the underworld to save his beloved wife Eurydice. Orpheus finds Eurydice, but betrays Hades's instruction not to look back at her while walking out of the underworld and then loses her for good. And in Dante's famous *Inferno*, the poet is led through Hell by the Roman poet Virgil.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The First World War was supposed to be the "war to end all wars." While this of course did not turn out to be the case, this phrase reflects the fact that, at the time, people struggled to imagine anything as hellish as WWI ever happening again. Running from 1914 to 1918, the war was essentially a perfect storm of complicated alliances and technological advancement, drawing in numerous countries and resulting in millions of deaths (both military and civilian).

Sparked by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the war was predicted to be over quickly. It dragged on far longer than expected, however, in part because of the slow, brutal nature of trench warfare. The exhaustion of Sassoon's soldier in this poem can easily stand in for fatigue with the war more generally.

The Hindenburg Line (where the epigraph suggests this poem was either set, composed, or both) was a long line of defensive infrastructure built by the Germans during the winter of 1916 to 1917. It ran from Arras to Laffaux (both in France), and it was intended to hold back the Allied forces while Germany recuperated from heavy losses. One of many notorious stories

about Sassoon centers on his single-handed solo capture of the German trench along this line.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Sassoon's Life and Work — Listen to a BBC Radio discussion about Siegfried Sassoon, focusing on his eventual opposition to the war. (https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b007mvl9)
- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to a reading of "The Rear-Guard." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FW1-4CfVrfs)
- The First World War In Colour — Watch a clip from Peter Jackson's astonishing WWI film. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZY7RQAX_03c)
- The Hindenburg Line — Check out a clip explaining the purpose of the German's defensive infrastructure. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5vvGK_BWsI4)
- Sassoon's Wartime Experiences — Read a letter home from the poet himself. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/siegfried-sassoon-letters-to-his-uncle)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER SIEGFRIED SASSOON POEMS

- Attack
- Base Details
- Suicide in the Trenches
- The Death Bed

HOW TO CITE

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