

## Anthem for Doomed Youth

### Glossary

**passing-bells** — church-bells rung for the dying

**orisons** — prayers

**pall** — cloth spread over a coffin

### What the poem is about

- ◆ The youthful dead of the First World War are lamented in elegiac form.
- ◆ The circumstances of soldiers' deaths, without proper funeral rites and burial, is bitterly criticised.
- ◆ The sorrow of the soldiers' loved ones who remain is their memorial.

### Summary

- ◆ The violent, ugly circumstances of the battlefield provide the funeral and graveyard services for the young war dead.
- ◆ The madness of this situation (with 'demented choirs') and its gross evil ('the monstrous anger of the guns') are depicted.
- ◆ The contrasting sestet (last six lines) of the sonnet describes the sorrowing of the young ones' communities and friends.
- ◆ The poem contrasts the way human lives should be valued and commemorated with how war causes them to be treated.

### Stylistic points

- ◆ A sonnet, divided into octave and sestet.
- ◆ The octave conveys the ugliness and evil of the battlefield-graveyard with immediacy — especially in the use of onomatopoeia ('stuttering', and so on).
- ◆ The octave is based on an extended (and embittered) analogy between the soldiers' funeral and burial in war and customary funeral rites (with prayers and choirs).
- ◆ The tone of the sestet is less bitter, focusing on the mourning friends but sustaining the analogy with funeral customs ('candles', 'pall', and so on).

### Close reading

It was customary for the sacrifices during the First World War to be celebrated not only as signs of dedication to a national cause, but as a religious commitment. It was argued, by churchmen, that God was on Britain's side in the conflict. At religious services, in cathedrals and parish churches across England and the Empire, anthems and hymns were sung in thanksgiving for the glorious sacrifices that were being made in the cause of victory and peace.

The title of Owen's sonnet, bitterly critical of the slaughter, appears to promise an 'anthem'. This is deliberately ironic. An anthem is usually a prolonged song of praise, such as a patriotic writer might have written for a nation's young fighting heroes, and is often associated with acts of worship, where it is sung by a choir. Owen, however, in presenting this brief poem as an 'anthem' emphasises his point that there is nothing to celebrate in his subject by undermining the concept. He points out that no anthems will (or can) be sung on the battlefields.

The adjective, 'doomed', in the title, adds to the negative tone of the poem. Everything about that word is disturbing: its gloomy sound as well as its sense of an overwhelming fate that mere humans cannot reverse.

That it is 'youth' that is 'doomed', completes the tragic implications of the title. Age is doomed to death by virtue of its years. But it is a perversity of circumstances for youth to be so brutally cut short. We can see that the title of this work is very much a part of the meaning of the poem.

'Anthem for Doomed Youth' is a sonnet, with fourteen lines. While Owen has purposefully overthrown the expectation of an anthem (a prolonged song of praise) — introduced in his title — he has very strictly observed the convention of the sonnet in the poem itself. We notice the principal division into octave and sestet, the use of subdivision into quatrains (three four-line sections), which is emphasised by the orderly rhyming pattern, and the concluding couplet.

Owen has been as careful as this, stylistically, to make clear the difference between his subject matter and what is normally set forth in an anthem. The brevity of the sonnet suggests that there is little to be said about this subject of doomed youth, beyond what he has said here. The musicality of an anthem is replaced by the harsh sounds of war. However, the compression required by just fourteen lines of poetry gives power to the poem. What needs to be said is emphatic and disturbing. It is the artistic embodiment, in a brief space, of an intense idea.

Owen begins his sonnet with a devastating line:

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?

A 'passing-bell' is that which tolls — slowly, on a single note — in the parish church in old English custom, when one of the community is dying or has died.

So inhuman, however, is the slaughter of young men in the War that, as Owen envisages the circumstances of their deaths, any idea of their humanity is stripped from them and they 'die as cattle'. The question which forms the opening line is rhetorical: the dignified custom of the 'passing-bell' has itself passed away, in the dehumanisation of the unprecedented mass killings of the Great War.

There is no doubt of Owen's passion here, but we notice how he has restrained his feelings (and thereby increased the poem's power and universality) by artistic constraints — the rhetorical question, the reference to ancient custom, the simile ('as cattle') and the even iambic rhythm of the line (an unaccented syllable, followed by an accented one).

To accompany their deaths, the young men have only the percussion of the guns and rifles. Owen closes his first quatrain in noisy onomatopoeia:

the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle  
Can patter out their hasty orisons.

In particular, we notice the adjectives 'rapid' and 'hasty'. The quick firing of the rifles are like hasty prayers, stammered out over the dead. But this brevity, like the brevity of the sonnet itself, indicates how burial rituals, in war, have lost both humanity and spirituality. In place of anthems and prayers there is the blunt, disquieting recognition of the futility of the sacrifice. This is accompanied by the sounds of war — indicating the determination to continue killing. 'Orisons', like 'passing-bells', is deliberately old-fashioned. Owen is suggesting that the modern world that was cruelly born in World War I has discarded traditional funeral rites and, thereby, the spiritual value that was once placed on human life. Implicitly, also, he is criticising those churchmen at the time who saw the War as a holy cause. Its reality is far removed from the true teachings of religion.

The negativity of the poem is stressed, in the second quatrain, by the succession of negatives, which alliterate:

No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;  
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs...

Here, Owen introduces a note of surprise. Informed that there are no orisons or tolling bells, we are startled to learn that, nonetheless, there are choirs to sing the dead to their rest. We associate choirs with anthems. But the next line explains exactly which 'choirs' these are, as the octave is brought to a resonant close:

The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;  
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

Onomatopoeia is present again in 'shrill' and 'wailing'. For Owen, traditional observances would be a mockery. Nothing can comfort the pain of this sacrifice. And in the reference to English rural life in 'sad shires', Owen, like his contemporary poet, A.E. Housman, thinks of his typical young Englishman as a Shropshire lad, and the traditional, united country life wherein each individual is known as part of the community and his loss grieved. 'Calling' is precisely the right word here. For although the bugler's 'last post' is usually interpreted as a strain of farewell, Owen, sadly, hears it as a plaintive and unanswerable call to return.

Echoing the opening line of the poem, the sestet similarly begins with a question. This marks a further stage in the progress of the dead youths' fate. It brings a new emphasis into the poetry, as Owen now asks who will pray for the souls of these lost ones:

What candles may be held to speed them all?

— that is, to wish them 'God-speed' on their spiritual journey. With an interesting development, the speaker does not suggest that they will be utterly forgotten, as they were on the battlefield.

But their liturgy will not be a formal rite, with candles. Rather, the signs of a spiritual commemoration of these dead young ones will be seen in the weeping eyes and the pale brows of their friends.

In the place of wreaths, there will be the memories of those left behind. In the meantime, there is at 'each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds'.

This moving image of closure aptly, but quietly, closes the sonnet. It is another English touch (like the conclusion to the octave), referring not only to drawing blinds at evening, but to the old custom of drawing down the blinds in a house of mourning.

The most remarkable feature of this accomplished poem is its combination of bitterness and poignancy — Owen's direct and forceful criticism of the brutality of war, and his 'tenderness' in contemplating the loved ones of the 'doomed youth' left behind in bereavement and grief. Both emotions could easily have become uncontrolled, but Owen's mastery of the sonnet form prevents such a lapse. These two themes precisely complement each other in mood, a balance that is secured by the sonnet's disciplined division into octave and sestet.

In a sense, in its sestet, the poem is anthem-like, rather than a mockery of such things. The gentleness, holiness and tenderness mentioned there, although not in the conventional forms of an anthem offered in a service, are the kinds of qualities anthems and liturgies often commemorate and convey.

### Focus questions

- 1 Why is onomatopoeia so effective in the octave of this poem?
- 2 What is the tone of Owen's extended analogy between customary funeral rites and those experienced by the 'doomed youth'? (Begin with 'anthem' in the title).