

THE PARABLE OF THE OLD MAN AND THE YOUNG

'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young'

Glossary of Terms

Clave	This word is the past tense of cleave which means to remain faithful or in this case to cut the wood as well.
Parapet	A defensive wall or fortification or low wall or barrier for defence on a roof or balcony
Forth	An archaic word for go out
Slay	To kill by violent means or to destroy. Often refers to murder.
Thy	A possessive pronoun used to show the person or thing being addressed
Thicket	A dense growth of bush or shrubs that is hard to penetrate
Slew	From the word slay that is used to describe the deaths of a large number of people
Seed	Offspring or progeny (children)

OVERVIEW

'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young' is an unusual poem that doesn't use a traditional rhyme scheme. Its subject matter is the biblical story of the ascent of Abraham up Mount Moriah and his near sacrifice of his son, Isaac. Owen compares this sacrifice to the beginning of World War One in the final lines. He blames the various countries leaders 'Pride' for the sacrifice of innocent young men.

A parable can be defined as a short tale or story that is intended to be allegorical in nature. This means that it is a story that teaches a moral or religious lesson. Jesus often used parables in teaching Christianity and the idea of the parable has been used in Western literature and can be in prose or verse as our text is. Here Owen uses a biblical story adapts it to suit his purpose ie to teach us about the pointlessness of war.

The next piece of information to help you understand the poem is the story of Abraham. This is a Bible story from the book of Genesis. In the story God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, on Mount Moriah. Abraham sets out to do this without hesitation and binds his son to the altar.

Suddenly an angel of God stops him and Abraham sacrifices a nearby ram instead.

This is a story of sacrifice and this is how Owen saw the death of so many young and innocent men. He says the old men should not have bowed to pride and this would have saved all the young men who were sacrificed.

STANZA BY STANZA ANALYSIS

'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young' is another poem by Owen to show the waste and futility of war. He uses the biblical story of 'Abram' to develop the images of sacrifice in the poem and these sacrifices for him were the hallmark of the war. Before you study this poem it is important to look at the glossary, as there are words that are archaic used and some of the meanings have changed in modern usage.

The poem begins with the irony of 'Abram' the father of all nations, going to sacrifice his son. How can anyone be the father of all nations if all the young men are dead? Remember too that this is not an exact retelling of the parable and that Owen certainly integrates the old Biblical story and the war. This is obvious by the middle of the poem with the lines,

'Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,
and builded parapets and trenches there,'

Here he 'sojourned' with Isaac who asks him where the lamb is for the 'burnt offering'. Before he can get any reply he is 'bound' and 'stretched forth the knife'. Just before he can be killed an angel calls out,

'Lay not thy hand upon the lad'
Neither do anything to him, thy son.'

And then tells them about the 'Ram'. The old man ignores this and 'slew the son' and Owen extends this to 'half the seed of Europe'. Note that it is only the final two lines of the poem that rhyme and this is where Owen's warning about war is given. This is a true condemnation of any leader who sacrifices young men for their own ego. We know that

Owen is focused on the waste and futility of war and here he reinforces this. Owen blames Europe's ruling elite for the war and the poem gives us this message clearly. Some critics have also suggested that the blind faith and loyalty that Abraham had in God cannot be translated into the real world. Others have suggested that Owen is saying that blind faith in anything is bad. You need to think about these ideas and decide which you think Owen means.

Questions

- ∞ In your own words give the definition of the word parable.
- ∞ In 5-10 lines retell the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac in your own words.
- ∞ Research Genesis 22. It is the first book in the Bible. This is where you will find the story of Abraham and Isaac. What words and ideas does Owen take to use in his poem? Think also about the changes that he makes to the story.
- ∞ What does 'first-born' mean?
- ∞ Discuss Owen's use of more modern language and images such as 'paraper' and 'lad' with this ancient tale. What impact do these have on the reader?
- ∞ Why is 'Ram of Pride' capitalized?
- ∞ How does Owen bind the first section of the poem together without the common rhyme scheme?