***Anthem for Doomed Youth* by Wilfred Owen**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QKqj4QveNcw>

**Biographical Context**

Wilfred Owen was born in Shropshire, England, in 1893 and studied at the University of Reading. Because he could not afford to continue his education, he left school and worked as an English-language tutor in France while also writing poetry. After the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, the loss of so many young lives horrified him. Nevertheless, after returning home in 1915, he enlisted in the Artist's Rifles of the British army, received a commission, and shipped out to France in late December 1916. Over the next several months, he wrote poetry to record his impressions of the war. In the spring of 1917, he exhibited symptoms of shell shock after experiencing the hell of trench warfare. He also contracted trench fever, a bacterial infection transmitted by lice. His superiors returned him to Britain, where he underwent treatment at a war hospital in Craiglockhart, Scotland, then a suburb of Edinburgh and now part of the city. While there, he continued to write poems, one of which was “Anthem for Doomed Youth.” An experienced poet who was also receiving treatment, Siegrfied Sassoon (1886-1967), helped him edit and polish his work. After his discharge from the hospital, Owen mingled with poets and wrote more poetry. His work by this time was showing great promise. Eventually, he returned to the army—and to war. He died in battle just one week before the war ended (November 11, 1918). He was only twenty-five.

**ANALYSIS**

**Form**

"Anthem for Doomed Youth" is a hybrid sonnet—that is, it combines the structure of the Petrarchan sonnet with the rhyme scheme of a Shakespearean sonnet except for lines 11 and 12. (The rhyme scheme of Shakespeare's sonnets is ABAB, CDCD, EF**EF**, GG; the rhyme scheme of Owen's poem is ABAB, CDCD, EF**FE**, GG.

**Meter**

All lines except 2 and 3 are in iambic pentameter, a verse format in which a line contains five pairs of syllables (ten syllables in all). In each pair, the first syllable is unstressed and the second stressed, making up a unit called an iamb. Occasionally a line of iambic pentameter contains an extra syllable, for a total of eleven, as in line 1:

What **PASS..|..**ing **BELLS..|..**for **THESE..|..**who **DIE..|..**as **CAT..|..**tle

Lines 2 and 3 of "Anthem for Doomed Youth" veer from the iambic pattern because the stress falls on the first syllable in the first pair (ON ly) in each line.

**Writing Approach and Literary Devices**

Owen wrote the poem from the perspective of a soldier on a battlefield. In the first eight lines (octet), the soldier asks and answers a question. Notice that the answer appears in the present tense and focuses almost exclusively on the sounds and frantic pace of war. Phrases with onomatopoeia—*stuttering rifles*, *rapid rattle*, *patter out*, and *wailing shells*—imitate the sounds on the field.

In the last six lines (sestet), the soldier asks and answers another question. Notice that this time the answer appears in the future tense and focuses entirely on the sights of the mourning period and the agonizing slowness of its pace.

Throughout the poem, Owen uses alliteration to promote rhythm and euphony, as in ***r****ifles'* ***r****apid****r****attle* and ***g****limmers of* ***g****ood-byes*. Note that some alliterations occur subtly, as in the *st* in *hasty* that echoes the *st* in *stuttering* and in the *sh* in *shrill* that alliterates with the *s h* in *shells* and the *sh* in*shires*.

In the octet, two personifications call attention to the terrifying rage and insanity of war: *monstrous anger of the guns* (comparison of guns to angry humans) and *demented choirs of wailing shells* (comparison of the shells to deranged humans).

In the sestet, three metaphors centre on the poignant suffering of the mourners at home. One compares the *holy glimmers* in the eyes of boys to candles, and another compares the *pallor of the girls' brows* to the pall that covers the casket. In the third, *the tenderness of patient minds* becomes the flowers that adorn the soldiers' graves.

**Themes**

**Senseless Devastation**. The butchery of war horrified Wilfred Owen. His comrades in arms represented the best hope for a better future, but all around him that hope was vanishing in the fire and smoke of the battlefield. The war also devastated the loved ones at home, robbing them of sons, daughters, brothers, and fathers and leaving only emptiness behind.

**Loss of Identity**. In war, young men with distinct personalities and unique talents become nameless pawns to do the bidding of the political decision-makers. When they fall on the battlefield, no one stops to mourn them or pay them homage. The bombs keep falling. The guns keep firing.

**IMAGERY**

*Anthem for Doomed Youth* relies heavily on the use of imagery from Christian rituals. By juxtaposing the [symbol](http://crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/symbol)s which accompany Christian burial e.g. passing bells, orisons and candles, with the images of the slaughter house (‘die as cattle’), Owen shocks the reader with the horror of war.

Owen turns each rite and ritual on its head:

**Anthem** - The choice of the term ‘Anthem’ for this sonnet would for Owen’s original readers have immediately created an image of a church service with choirs. Having set up this association, Owen then explores it further in the grim imagery of the guns and rifles and ‘shrill shells’ which are the only sounds to commemorate the death of the ‘doomed youth’.

**The passing bell** - a sign to the community that someone has died and in early times a signal that prayers for the departed should be said, it no longer sounds. Its human and divine function is replaced ‘only’ by gun and rifle fire. The sole choir to sing the ‘Anthem’ is a ‘demented’ one of shell fire, albeit ‘wailing.’ The personification of the weapons of war is chilling in its lack of humanity.

**Cattle** - In the opening line Owen immediately presents us with a simile for the ‘doomed youth’ who ‘die as cattle’. The image is of the slaughter house: blood, stench and fear, the lack of individuality and inhumanity all attach to the simile. Owen reverses the poetic device of personification here: men become de-personified, become animals. There are no ‘passing bells’ for de-humanised troops who go to their deaths like animals to slaughter

**Armaments** - Owen’s extended image in the first stanza of his ‘Anthem’ revolves around the personification of the armaments of war. He uses alliteration, consonance and onomatopoeia to convey the sounds of battle. It is these weapons which give voice to the bells and prayers which Owen implies should be part of the mourning process for the dead. Ironically their sound comes over as inhuman and pitiless. The ‘orisons’ which should be reverent are ‘hasty and ‘demented’. The ‘Monstrous anger of the guns’ gives these inanimate objects the human emotion of anger, the rifles’ stutter and the shells’ wail provide the ‘voice of mourning’. The irony lies in the fact that the very instruments of death give the ‘only’ equivalent of ‘orisons’ or ‘anthems’.

**Choirs** - The emphasis on the lack of the human voice in mourning is underpinned by the shrill demented choirs. Owen’s use of enjambment from line 6 to line 7 forces our sense of ‘the choirs’ from being reverent ecclesiastical choirs to the manic mechanical personification of the shells.

**Calling** - Two powerful pieces of personification add to the pathos of the final line of the first stanza:

* Bugles ‘call’ for the doomed youths from ‘sad’ English counties (‘shires’). The call of the bugles is ambiguous. They can be seen to call for the men to return home, as well as call for them because they never will return
* In the absence of appropriate official grief, the very slices of countryside become mourners. Owen uses simple, soft alliteration designating them as ‘sad shires’ which, unlike the guns and shells, are impotent.

The imagery, like the language which is an integral part of it, changes with the second stanza. The ‘doomed youth’ are now more visible. Owen no longer drowns out our awareness of the dead with the sounds of battle, exchanging auditory images for poignant visual ones:

**Candles** – these are an ancient Christian symbol of hope in the afterlife, and would have been held by an acolyte and set beside the coffin as a promise of salvation. In their absence, the flickering farewell memories are in the eyes of friends and brothers left behind.

**Pallor / pall** – The pale brows of the grief-stricken girls who are left behind by the dying boys become a substitute for the pall. This cover was used to deflect the mourners’ thoughts from the raw reality of the coffin and its contents, freeing the mind to think of higher things.

**Flowers** - The funeral wreaths and flowers of the average Edwardian funeral were a symbol of remembrance and respect, but are conspicuous by their absence on the battlefield. These are replaced with the ‘tenderness of patient minds’ symbolising the pain which will live on into the future for those who mourn the loss of the ‘doomed youth’.

**Drawn blinds** - The last line holds the final poignant symbol of mourning: the practice of closing curtains and blinds to symbolise a death is undertaken by nature itself. Owen’s final line thereby also echoes that of Laurence Binyon from his 1914 poem, *For the Fallen*:

*At the going down of the sun and in the morning*

*We will remember them.*