***Vergissmeinnicht* by Keith Douglas**

**Biographical Context**

Keith Douglas was an English poet born on January 24, 1920 in Kent. He was attended school at Christ’s Hospital and the University of Oxford. His childhood was difficult with his mother often sick and his father working in other cities to support his family. Like his father, a retired Captain in the Marines, Douglas too joined England’s armed forces. In 1939, within days of England’s declaration of war against Germany, Douglas enlisted in the army, became an officer and was eventually deployed to North Africa where he saw combat. He was a successful officer, attained the rank of Captain and was given command of a company of tanks. In December of 1943 he returned to England to prepare for a second deployment in the D-Day invasion of Normandy. Three days after landing, on June 9, 1944, Douglas was killed in action by enemy mortar fire and was buried in France at the Tilly-sur-Seulles War Cemetery. Although he was a poet before going to war, many of his most well regarded works come from his combat experiences, including “Desert Flowers” and “Alamein to Zem Zem”.

**Notes from EITESKILLS.COM**

In *Vergissmeinnicht*, the speaker is a soldier fighting in World War II in North Africa. The speaker is returning to the scene of a battle after 3 weeks. There is no fighting at the scene this time; however, the body of an enemy soldier, who attacked the speaker and was then killed, is present. The first two stanzas don't allow for any humanity to be seen in the enemy soldier. The middle two stanzas introduce the aspect of his life outside of being an enemy, through the picture of the soldier’s love with "Vergissmeinnicht" (forget me not), written on it. Yet, the stanzas continue to disregard his humanity because of his role as a combatant against the speaker and his companions. There is a shift within the last two stanzas that address the second aspect of the dead soldier, his role as a lover to the woman in this picture.

The rhyme scheme changes throughout the poem, never keeping with the same pattern for even two stanzas in a row. The second to last stanza, where the major shift in tone occurs, does not even contain rhyming within it and draws more attention to the shift as a result.

Douglas uses a lot of alliteration throughout *Vergissmeinnicht*. A larger emphasis is placed on phrases such as ‘soldier singled’, ‘skin the swart flies’, and ‘solider sprawling’ through the repetition of the 's' sound in the beginning of each word. All of the phrases containing alliteration are revolving around the actual death of the enemy soldier. This has an effect of placing much more importance on the dead body of the solider then the life it lived before hand. The sibilance also has connotations of disgust with the hissing sounds.

In reading this poem by Keith Douglas, I did not feel as though the speaker felt sorry for the dead solider, or even sympathetic to the soldier's lover. The final stanza seemed much more matter-of-fact than emotional, just stating how being a soldier took away the possibility of being a lover for the dead man. However, I think the lack of emotion was necessary for this poem to seem as though the speaker truly experienced this situation, because as a soldier he had to kill the man in order to survive.

**Verse Form**

* Rhyme Scheme: ABBA, CDCD, EEFF, GHGH, IJIJ
* Six Stanzas
* Each line has from 7 to 11 syllables
* 24 Lines
* The four lined, sparsely punctuated stanzas create an effect of chronological order that conveys the narrator’s thoughts and observations as he approached and examined the battlefield remains.
* The poem is separated into his differing trains of thought by the stanzas and varying rhyme structures.

**Theme**

* War has a desensitizing nature about it; senses of grisly appearance lose their shocking effect
* Regardless of affiliation, the destructive nature of war steals otherwise normal lives
* War is ultimately between humans; even the enemy has a life back home relatable to your own
* The nature of war is not pretty, it is not easy to observe and has an eerie way of haunting through memory

**Critical terminology**

* The title, in German, focussing on a small detail of his memory, a picture he found, shows the great significance it had emotionally on him
* The personifications of the artillery and equipment develop the surreal tone of the poem by making inanimate objects come to like in a dream-like fashion.
* The similes are used to help articulate Douglas’ impressions of his observations with greater detail.
* The metaphors serve a similar purpose, that being to help add depth to Douglas’ descriptions
* The repetition helps connect seemingly dissimilar references such as the passage of time and the disappearance of combatants
* The usage of German adds a sense of realism and deepens the narrator’s ability to convey his own experience
* The narrator’s sets a surreal mood to the poem as he visits with words, a previously fought over battlefield. This helps readers grasp an understanding of his war experiences and a glimpse into his impressions of the desensitizing nature of combat.

**Examples of analysis**

**Weak Answer:** “Vergissmeinnicht” is an emotional poem by Keith Douglas. It has a mood in it and really makes the reader feel sympathy for what he witnesses and adds to our appreciation.

This is not a good answer. **"It has a mood in it"** is not specific about the mood and **"in it"** is a slang phrase. Also, **"It adds to our appreciation,"** should never be written. Appreciation means - what is your understanding?

**Better Answer:** “Vergissmeinnicht” by Keith Douglas is a compelling poem with a sinister, eerie atmosphere that permeates the entire text. It is the poet's own account of being at war. As he crosses the battlefield he notices another soldier and he realises it is an old enemy fighter who is now dead. On closer inspection, he finds a photograph of the soldier's girlfriend saying “Vergissmeinnicht" - forget me not, and is sparked into a moment of realisation as he thinks about the role that soldiers have to fulfil. Douglas’ vivid word choice, emotive imagery and reflective tone force the reader to think about the point of war and to re-evaluate our perception of soldiers. We can see that there are two sides to soldiers - a private and public life and that the huge sacrifice they make must never be forgotten.

**Why is this a good answer?**

* The atmosphere is described as "sinister, eerie". This is specific to the poem.
* "Douglas’ vivid word choice, emotive imagery and reflective tone" are used as specific examples of techniques.
* "We can see that there are two sides to soldiers - a private and public life and that the huge sacrifice they make must never be forgotten." This is evaluation and shows appreciation. There is a clear understanding about the poet's message and central concerns.