

# **Collected Poems Study Guide**

## **Collected Poems by Wilfred Owen**

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# Introduction and Preface

## Introduction and Preface Summary

The book begins with an introduction written by C. Day Lewis. Lewis first explains that while Wilfred Owen was a competent poet before the beginning of World War I, he seemed to mature almost immediately under the stress of combat. Lewis maintains that of all the poets to emerge from the war, Owen was the most important for Lewis' generation.

Next, Lewis gives a brief biography of Owen. Owen is born to middle class parents in Oswestry, England in 1893. Although Owen's parents are not rich, they are cultured and exposed Owen to art, literature, and music, with Owen learning the piano. Owen is always extremely close to his mother in his youth and his letters to her are the most common. Although Owen is usually not considered very well read, Lewis argues that considering his age and monetary situation he read a great deal. Owen's early writings reveal a bitter dissatisfaction with life common to many adolescents.

In 1911, Owen leaves home to attend London University, but money runs short, forcing Owen to become an assistant to a vicar and study for the priesthood. However, Owen's visits to the slums around his parish convince him of the necessity of social reform, and Owen soon experiences a lapse in faith. This lapse causes Owen to leave his job with the vicar to become a tutor to two boys in France. At this job Owen meets Laurent Tailhade, a professional poet who helps Owen with his literary ambitions.

When the war breaks out in 1914, Owen feels that it makes his own life more precious and is angered at the politicians who send good members of his generation to death for their glory. Lewis believes Owen was still largely egocentric at the beginning of the war, which is revealed in his letters. Although Owen feels no shame at remaining a civilian, he returns to England in August or September of 1915 and joins the Army. In December 1916, Owen arrives in France as an infantryman. Lewis points out that compared to World War II, World War I was a war without movement, which gave time to aspiring writers to compose poetry on the front. Lewis argues that this difference may be the reason why so many major poets came out of World War I compared to World War II. A week before an armistice ends the war, Owen is killed in France.

Lewis wonders what Owen's career as a poet would have been if he had survived the war, and Lewis conjectures Owen would have proved a major poet no matter what subject he turned to after the war. Lewis admits that Owen was not a technically innovative poet in most ways, but he knew how to apply current techniques to his subject. Despite Owen's objections to the war, he feels the best way for him to change the situation is to go the front to protect his men.

Lewis concludes the introduction with some short notes on his sources and the organization of the poems in the book.



In Owen's preface, he explains that the poems in the book are about war but not about heroism or glory because war is only a pity.

## Introduction and Preface Analysis

Lewis spends much of his introduction analyzing Owen's early writing, but Lewis never considers the idea that the morbid and sad nature of Owen's early writings prepared him well for writing about the war a few years later. In particular, Owen's obsession with the transitory nature of all things seems to be excellent preparation for the constant cycle of death and the bringing in of fresh recruits Owen would see on the Western Front. Furthermore, Owen's deep concern for his men, and enemy soldiers as well, is presaged by the concern he shows for the urban poor when he studies with the vicar.

However, Owen also reveals himself to be hardened against death to a large degree when the war breaks out. In one of Owen's letters from near the outbreak of war, Owen writes that "the guns will effect a little useful weeding" (p. 19). Owen despairs that the war will kill some of the best people of his generation, but Owen does not seem to be concerned with the deaths of the others. The letter suggests that Owen might have embraced a kind of Social Darwinism given its later reference to natural selection. It is quite possible that Owen viewed the deaths of "inferior" people to be necessary for the progress of society. Once Owen becomes involved with the war, this attitude seems to disappear completely, with Owen feeling sympathy for all the soldiers involved.

In Owen's preface, he reinforces this idea. Owen rejects the ideas of heroism and glory because he does not believe that English poetry is capable of speaking of them, suggesting that English culture is not capable of achieving those ideals. Owen believes that war is only pity and that is all poetry is capable of speaking about, so that must be Owen's subject.



# Pages 35-49

## Pages 35-49 Summary

In "Strange Meeting", Owen describes retreating from a battle and being grabbed by another soldier. Owen realizes the soldier is dead and that they are both in hell. The other soldier explains that the war is destroying civilization and that he is a soldier who was killed by Owen. Now that they are dead, both can rest.

In "Insensibility", Owen writes that men who become immune to the horrors of battle after seeing so much death are lucky because they do not feel fear or sorrow for the tragedy of war. However, Owen concludes that these same men are cursed because they have destroyed everything that makes them human.

"Apologia Pro Poemate Meo" discusses the occasional joys of war. Owen believes that life becomes the ultimate absurdity in war, so soldiers can enjoy it without other concerns. Owen realizes that the joy soldiers feel in war is fleeting and that combat is actually hell.

The poem "Greater Love" argues that the romantic love that a man might feel for a woman is not as strong as the love a soldier feels for his fallen comrades.

In "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young", Owen describes Abraham taking Isaac to a mountain to sacrifice him. When God tells Abraham there is no need to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham kills Isaac anyway, along with half of the sons of Europe.

"Arms and the Boy" describes a soldier coming to appreciate the bayonets and bullets. Owen believes this is necessary because the soldier will not grow weapons on his body like an animal.

In "Anthem for Doomed Youth" Owen wonders what kind of bells will mark the passing of the soldiers dying by the thousands and concludes that only the sound of guns will mark every soldier's death. Each day of the war is like the end of a funeral.

"The Send-Off" describes dead soldiers being shipped away from the front back home to be buried. Owen wonders if the dead will return to a celebration but realizes that they will return to their isolated homes in silence.

"Exposure" describes the experience of standing night watch in the middle of winter. The soldiers are very cold and question why they are there because nothing is happening. Even as the sun begins to rise, the soldiers only see it as a sign of sadness and feel that the love of God is dying.



## Pages 35-49 Analysis

In the poem "Strange Meeting", the soldier Owen kills refers to Owen as "my friend", suggesting that Owen does not see a division between the soldiers on different sides. Also, the dead soldier tells Owen that the soldiers will keep fighting even as nations destroy their progress. Owen seems prescient in seeing the barbarity Europe was falling into during and after the war.

The poem "Insensibility" deals with the damage war does to soldiers mentally and emotionally. In war, it is necessary for a soldier to desensitize himself from the horrors going on around him, hence the name "Insensibility." Owen realizes that this is not a positive development, for anyone who survives the war has turned himself into a rock more than a man.

The title of "Apologia Pro Poemate Meo" is Latin, meaning roughly "a defense of my poetry." This title along with the closing lines strongly indicate that Owen meant this poem for civilian readers, and Owen's message to them appears to be that war is driving all soldiers mad to the point that their only joy is the loss of fear when faced with almost certain death.

In "Greater Love", Owen strongly suggests that the war is destroying soldiers' capabilities to have normal romantic love because the soldiers will always love the dead they lost in the war more than their romantic partners.

"The Parable of the Old Man and the Young" is an extended reference to the story of Abraham and Isaac in the book of Genesis in the Bible. God asks Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, but once God is assured of Abraham's loyalty, God and Abraham let Isaac live. Owen is comparing the leaders of Europe to Abraham and the soldiers to Isaac, but Europe's leaders refuse to listen to God's order to stop the sacrifice.

"Arms and the Boy" suggests that a soldier must come to love his weapons in order to survive. The poem also suggests that even though a young soldier will not grow claws or horns like an animal, he is still doing the work of a beast.

In "Anthem for Doomed Youth", Owen compares the sound of guns to bells and artillery to choirs. Owen may be suggesting that war has become like a religion for the politicians and the soldiers.

In the last paragraph of "The Send-Off," Owen wonders if the dead will return to a large celebration. Owen here is referring to the massive celebrations that accompanied the soldiers leaving for the front at the beginning of the war.

In "Exposure," Owen writes that the soldiers are afraid of the coming of spring and only find dawn to be a miserable experience. Both of these are traditionally seen as signs of hope, but for Owen they just serve as a reminder that the war is ongoing.



# Pages 50-63

## Pages 50-63 Summary

In "The Show", Owen's soul rises up above the battlefield with Death and sees it from a bird's eye view. Owen sees caterpillars slinking into ditches and eating each other. Owen is frightened by what he sees and falls back to the ground along with Death, who shows Owen his own severed head.

"Spring Offensive" describes soldiers massing at the top of a hill. Although the soldiers enjoy the early summer weather, they are fearful of what is about to happen. They relax in the field until a cold breeze blows in, and they realize that the battle is about to begin. When the soldiers rush down the hill, they are butchered by entrenched soldiers on the other side. While some say that the soldiers who died were immediately taken by God, the soldiers who live do not speak about those who died.

In "Dulce Et Decorum Est", Owen describes soldiers walking back to their trenches to rest when they are attacked by gas. Most of the soldiers are able to put on their masks in time, but one soldier "drowns" in the gas. Owen finds his death disgusting and writes that if others saw it they would not praise war so highly.

"Asleep" tells the story of a soldier who falls asleep and is shot dead. Owen wonders if the soldier is in heaven or just returning to the earth and concludes that there is no way to tell.

In "Futility", Owen describes attempting to wake a soldier by moving him into the sun, but the soldier is dead and cannot be awakened.

"The Last Laugh" tells of three different soldiers who are killed. Each one calls out for something different in his dying moment, but each is laughed at by different types of weaponry.

In "The Letter", Owen assumes the perspective of a soldier writing home to his wife. Interspersed with the soldier's words to his wife are descriptions of what is going on as he writes. The soldier is killed and asks another soldier to write to his wife for him.

In "The Sentry", Owen and some other soldiers take refuge in an old dugout and are approached by a sentry. The sentry says that he is blind, so Owen holds a flame close to his eyes and asks if the sentry can see the light. The sentry responds that he cannot, but later says he can see a light after Owen's light is out.

"Conscious" describes a soldier waking up wounded in a hospital. The soldier is impressed with how well kept the hospital is but soon feels alternately hot and cold. At the end of the poem, the soldier can no longer see.



## Pages 50-63 Analysis

"The Show" refers to caterpillars going into ditches. This refers to lines of soldiers walking into trenches. When Owen refers to the spines on the caterpillars he is almost certainly writing of bayonets on the soldiers' rifles.

In the fifth stanza of "Spring Offensive", Owen describes the soldiers rush down the hill and writes that "the whole sky burned/With fury against them..." This description makes it seem as if the soldiers are fighting against nature itself, which is an impossible fight. Owen here may be suggesting both that war is ultimately futile and that it is unnatural.

"Dulce Et Decorum Est" is by far Owen's most famous poem and is regularly taught in literature classes. The title is Latin, and when combined with the last line of the poem, a line from the Roman poet Horace, it translates to "it is beautiful and honorable to die for your fatherland." Owen clearly believes that this is an incredibly damaging falsehood.

In "Asleep", Owen writes that the dead soldier is less cold than the soldiers who are still alive, which suggests that soldiers still fighting are in many ways more dead than those who are literally dead.

The last two lines of "Futility" question why sunbeams bother to reach earth and give life. Owen is questioning if there is any point to existence in the face of war.

"The Last Laugh" implies that regardless of what is dearest to a soldier, the war will still destroy him and go on as if nothing has changed.

In "The Letter", the soldier writing home does not tell his wife about his actual conditions. The soldier actually tries to reassure his wife that the war is almost over, and that he will soon come safely home. Owen is likely pointing out that letters home make the war seem better than it really is because most soldiers do not want to upset their loved ones.

At the end of "The Sentry", the blinded sentry claims to be able to see a light after Owen has already put out his light. The light the sentry sees is most likely to be the light many people report seeing just before death.

"Conscious" contrasts with "The Sentry" in that in the former poem, Owen uses darkness to imply death, while in the latter Owen uses light to mean the same thing. Furthermore, Owen seems to be suggesting that the nurses and doctors in the military hospitals are uncaring because how much death they see.





# Pages 64-73

## Pages 64-73 Summary

In "A Terre", Owen assumes the voice of a wounded soldier who is suffering from an infection that will destroy his arms. The soldier mocks the idea that it is good to lead a short, happy life and says that he would be very happy to grow old and bald. The soldier claims he would be happy to live a simple life just for the air and would not be upset if he had to work sweeping floors. Without his limbs, however, the soldier is convinced he will be better off dead and return to the earth.

"Disabled" also describes a soldier who is missing multiple limbs. The soldier sits in a hospital ward looking out the window and remembering how happy the town used to be. The soldier remembers joining the military and having no fear of combat but thinking only about how good he would look in a uniform and the glory of war. Now, the soldier just wants someone to come put him into bed.

The poem "Mental Cases" describes soldiers who suffer psychological trauma from the war. Seeing them in a constant state of panic, Owen believes that he is in hell. The soldiers are incapable of forgetting all the gruesome sights they witnessed in combat because everything reminds them of it.

In "The Chances", Owen affects a cockney accent and describes an attack on an enemy trench. One of the soldiers, Jim, figures there are five possibilities of what can happen in the battle. Jim gets the last of those, which is insanity.

In "The Dead-Beat," a soldier falls to the ground as his squad is marching back to its trench. Other soldiers speculate that the soldier has gone mad from dreams of home, but when the medics come to take him to the hospital, they assure the others that he is not faking. The next day, the doctor informs the squad that the soldier died shortly after being brought in.

## Pages 64-73 Analysis

The title of the poem "A Terre" means "the earth" in French; according to Owen, this is the philosophy of many soldiers. The title and subtitle are connected to the last three stanzas of the poem where the soldier believes he would be better off returning to the earth than to live as an amputee. Owen is claiming that the philosophy of many soldiers is death. In the third stanza, Owen writes that if he had a son, he would only teach him violent activities. This is likely a criticism of what Owen considers to be his generation's violent upbringings.

While "Disabled" is primarily about an individual amputee soldier, it also captures the declining mood of all the combatant countries as the war wore on. The town is no longer happy, and almost no one comes to welcome the wounded soldier home. People on the



home front want to forget the war is ongoing. Also, the soldier's wish to be put to bed can also be interpreted as a wish to die.

In "Mental Cases", the soldiers are likely suffering from "shell shock", or what is now called "post-traumatic stress disorder." These soldiers see every color as a different shade of blood. Also, when Owen says that they snatch after the people "who smote them," he is probably not referring to enemy soldiers but the society that sent the soldiers off to war.

"The Chances" suggests that the worst possible outcome of a battle for a soldier is that he goes insane because Owen refers to it as being wounded, taken prisoner and killed all in one.

"The Dead-Beat" can be considered another indictment of the poor medical treatments soldiers received. The soldier who dies suffered from an undiagnosed illness, and the doctor who treated him was drunk.



# Pages 74-86

## Pages 74-86 Summary

"S.I.W." is about a young soldier leaving home for the war. The soldier's father tells him that death is better than disgrace, and his sisters wish they could go to war. Once the soldier arrives at the front, he writes home telling his family that everything is fine, but the soldier is actually almost killed on a daily basis. Owen's morning patrol finds the soldier after being shot and carries him back to the trenches. When the soldier is buried, his mother says he "died smiling".

In "Smile, Smile, Smile", Owen writes of men reading the newspaper. The newspaper defends the war on the grounds that if it is not won, all the soldiers already dead will have died in vain. The soldiers also see pictures of dead soldiers in the newspapers, and all the dead soldiers are smiling in the pictures.

In "Inspection", a young soldier is punished for having blood on his uniform at parade. The soldier says that the earth objects to young blood, so they are being bled, but all humanity will have to answer to God for the war.

"The Calls" describes the different sounds that Owen uses to mark the time throughout his day in the trench. Owen hears a fog-horn at dawn, bells at nine, church bells at ten, bugles in the afternoon, gongs at dusk, and artillery at night. Finally, Owen hears men talking in the middle of the night and must get up.

In "At a Cavalry near the Ancre," Owen describes soldiers walking down a shelled out road. Owen writes that while writers pledge their loyalty to their governments, people who love die without hate.

Owen describes a church that has been hit with artillery in "Le Christianisme". One statue of the Virgin Mary is left intact, but Owen is sure it will be bombed.

In "Soldier's Dream", Owen dreams that Jesus stopped all the machinery of the war, but when Owen wakes up, he discovers that all the weapons were fixed.

Owen marvels at a large piece of British artillery in "Sonnet". Owen wants the cannon to be effective in its mission but be destroyed when the war is over.

In "The Next War", Owen writes that soldiers are not afraid of Death because he is a constant companion on the battlefield. Soldiers laugh at death, knowing that even greater wars will come.



## Pages 74-86 Analysis

The title "S.I.W." stood for "Self Inflicted Wounds" in the British Military during World War I, meaning that the soldier in the poem shot himself. The third stanza makes it clear that the soldier did this because he could no longer stand the daily near-death experiences that made him feel as if death was playing with him. The soldier likely "died smiling" because he sees suicide as an escape from the even worse fate of continuing to fight the war.

The poem "Smile, Smile, Smile" reveals that Owen has a very low opinion of the press. Owen clearly believes that the idea that the war must be waged to honor the dead is a foolish one, and he goes even further by rejecting the theory of the nation. Owen believes that England is no longer whole because all its soldiers are now in France.

The poem "Inspection", among others, raises the question of whether Owen renewed his Christian faith during the war. This poem suggests it in the claim that God will judge the race for the war, but Owen could simply be recording the sentiments of one his fellow soldiers.

"The Calls" can also be interpreted to show that Owen either returned to Christianity during the war or that he did not. Owen refers to the song of the organ as his belonging to his religion, but he also compares it to the song of pigeons, which could be a dismissal of it. In the last stanza, Owen is likely referring to his duty as an officer to comfort and reassure his men.

"At a Calvary near the Ancre" reveals a definite religious streak in Owen's poetry. Both Calvary and Golgotha refer to the site where Jesus was crucified. The beast who marked the priests in stanza two almost certainly refers to the war. Finally, the last stanza seems to be saying that a true Christian may die in the war, but he cannot hate his enemy.

The Christian theme continues in "Le Christianisme", but Owen seems to be implying that Christian belief is incapable of stopping the war.

As in "Le Christianisme", Owen is critical of Christian belief in "Soldier's Dream", Owen implies that Jesus could stop the war if he is real and omnipotent, but Jesus does not do it.

In "Sonnet", Owen describes the firing of the artillery as a curse four different times. Owen clearly believes the weapon to be evil, but Owen also approves of it temporarily to keep him and his men safe.

The last two lines of "The Next War" point out the absurdity of the war as Owen sees it. Owen believes the war is being waged for the governments involved and finds it ridiculous that he is fighting for a mere flag. This poem also seems to have great foresight given the destruction of World War II that would follow in fewer than thirty years.



# Pages 87-101

## Pages 87-101 Summary

In "The End", Owen wonders if after the war is over, the dead will live again. Owen asks Age and the Earth about this and both reply that they cannot bring the dead back.

"The Unreturning" begins as night falls on the battlefield, and Owen senses the dead might be returning. When no dead return, Owen decides he fears a heaven that will not let anyone out.

In "Miners", Owen hears his fire whispering to him and discovers that the coals are whispering about people who died in the war. Owen sees too many bones to count in the fire and realizes that the soldiers are being burned for the comfort of the rich and powerful, and the soldiers will not even be remembered.

Owen wonders in "Happiness" if soldiers will ever be able to be happy like they were as children after the war and concludes that it is impossible. Soldiers will never again be happier than they were when they were sad as children.

In "Shadwell Stair", Owen writes from the perspective of the ghost of Shadwell Stair who still has flesh. Stair walks the streets of London at night but is buried with another ghost at dawn.

"Six o'clock in Princes Street" describes people walking happily down a busy street. One person is reading a newspaper and sees the news of the war.

In "The Roads Also", Owen writes that the streets and houses also sleep and dream of a time before the war. Women cry for their dead husbands and the love they could have had.

"Hospital Barge at Cerisy" describes a barge full of wounded soldiers moving through a lock on the Somme. A man watching realizes that the men are in some way already dead.

In "Training", Owen describes depriving himself of worldly pleasures in order to make himself strong.

"Sonnet: To a Child" is an appreciation of the innocence of youth. Owen understands that a child is actually very wise, but as he gets older he will reach out to the world and realize how evil a place it is.

In "To Eros", Owen writes about his love of the concept of love. Owen sacrifices everything to this concept and eventually finds that he destroyed everything worthy loving.



In "My Shy Hand", Owen sees a small house where he imagines taking his lover. Owen desires to stay with his lover in this house forever.

## Pages 87-101 Analysis

"The End" represents a deep despair in Owen. The poem suggests that death is the most powerful force in the world and can certainly never be undone.

Like "The End", "The Unreturning" deals with the dead coming back to life, but this poem is even bleaker in its outlook. Owen seems to reject even the idea of Christian heaven because it traps the dead inside.

In "Miners," Owen writes that "where Death reposes/Peace lies indeed" (p. 91). This most likely means that where people believe death, i.e. war, is a solution for their problems, peace will always either be dead or an illusion, which is another way of saying that peace lies.

"Happiness" suggests that although soldiers may find things that should make them happier than they were as children, the war has scarred them emotionally to the extent that even heaven does not seem fulfilling anymore.

The poem "Shadwell Stair" could be taken literally to refer to a dead soldier returning to London, but it also might be about a soldier who returns from the war a mere specter of his former self.

"Six o'clock in Princes Street" sets up a stark contrast between the happiness of the busy street and the horrible stories of the war found in the newspaper.

In "The Roads Also", Owen seems to be saying that the war has not only changed people but even physical places. The war has so profoundly changed the world that even inanimate objects long for a time before it began.

In the fourth stanza of "Hospital Barge at Cerisy", Owen mentions Avalon, which in Arthurian legend is where King Arthur is sent to after dying on a funeral barge.

The poem "Training" was written when Owen was recovering from an injury and so likely reflects Owen's efforts to heal himself and get back to the front for his men.

"Sonnet: To a Child" likely reflects Owen's desire to return to the innocence he had before the war. Owen seems to believe that the individual is happy and good, but the world is inevitably corrupting.

The title "To Eros" makes reference to Eros the Greek god of love, whose Roman equivalent is the more famous Cupid. "Eros" also specifically refers to sexual love or lust, so Owen may be referring to loving sex in this poem.

The poem "My Shy Hand" is written while Owen is at war, but it is in no way about the war but about romance. The poem likely reflects a fantasy Owen uses to escape from the horrors of combat.



# Pages 102-114

## Pages 102-114 Summary

"The Kind Ghosts" is about a woman sleeping in a palace and dreaming of beautiful gardens. The palace is haunted, but the woman is unaware of the ghosts.

"Winter Song" describes the transition from fall into winter. Owen writes that the colors of the fall die in winter and are replaced by the paler colors like the white of snow.

In "Music", Owen writes that music has often moved him profoundly, but the sounds of musical instruments are not nearly as amazing as the music made by two lovers.

In "Storm", Owen describes being in the middle of a thunder storm and wanting to be struck by lightning. Owen believes this would be a glorious way to die.

In "To My Friend: (With an Identity Disk)", Owen remembers that he once desired to be highly honored by England after he was dead. Owen is now confident that he will not be so honored and is glad of it because he prefers that he is remembered simply as a soldier, no different from any of the others.

"Not one Corner..." is a fragment, and in it Owen describes seeing a huge hole cut into all of Europe. A voice tells Owen that this hole is "the Path of Glory" (p. 108).

The fragment "Cramped in that Funnelled Hole" describes soldiers crouching in a trench for protection. Owen refers to the hole as a mouth of hell.

The fragment "I saw his Round Mouth's Crimson" describes Owen watching a soldier dying slowly after being injured.

In the fragment "As Bronze may be much Beautiful", Owen writes that while a soldier may be made better men by war, many will be completely destroyed.

Owen asks in "Has Your Soul Sipped?" if the reader has taken part in the greatest joys of life. Owen writes that he has seen something that is sweeter than almost anything on earth. What Owen is describing is the smile of a dying soldier. Owen finds tremendous beauty in the soldier's bloody smile.

## Pages 102-114 Analysis

The ghosts Owen refers to in "The Kind Ghosts" are likely the spirits of soldiers killed in the war, and the woman likely symbolizes the politically powerful who are sacrificing the soldiers but are unconcerned about it.





Although Owen writes "Winter Song" while he is one the front lines of the war, it does not appear to pertain to the war in any way. This poem is likely another work of escapism that Owen used to distract himself from the brutal reality of war.

"Music" shows Owen's affinity for music and brings to mind the fact that he was a fairly accomplished violin and piano player. However, it also shows that Owen no longer valued music as highly as he did in his youth because romance became foremost in his mind.

Owen writes Storm around the time he joins the army, and it seems to suggest a desire for danger and even death that the war will quickly destroy. The poem could even be about Owen's excitement at the prospect of serving in the war with the storm representing battle.

The poem "To My Friend: (With an Identity Disk)" suggests that Owen did not wish to be remembered as a poet but as a simple soldier. Owen originally wishes to be remembered like the famous Romantic poet John Keats, but Owen now considers his small accomplishments in the war to be more important than his poetry.

The grave Owen describes in "Not one Corner..." is likely meant to be the grave of European civilization. Owen is mocking the idea that the war is glorious because it is actually just destroying everything worthwhile in Europe.

Throughout the fragment "Cramped in that Funnelled Hole," Owen describes the trench in anthropomorphic terms, which gives the impression that in the war even the land itself is fighting against Owen and his men.

In the fragment "I saw his Round Mouth's Crimson..." Owen employs a well-known comparison of a person's life to a day. The soldier's death is represented by sunset and the coming of night.

The fragment "As Bronze may be much Beautiful" points out that some men are made better by war but many are destroyed. Owen is likely not just referring to physical death but also mental breakdown or disability.

In "Has Your Soul Sipped?", Owen presents a soldier's death as something of great beauty when it would usually be seen as horrific. Owen clearly thinks the soldier's death is a tragedy, but Owen is likely suggesting that the life of the soldier was so beautiful and precious that even in death it remains sweeter than everything else life has to offer.



# Pages 115-130

## Pages 115-130 Summary

In "From My Diary, July 1914", Owen describes a number of things that he observes on a summer day, such as children swimming in a pond and bees gathering nectar. The poem moves from early morning with birds singing to the hot afternoon and finally to the stars coming out in the evening.

In "On My Songs", Owen expresses his appreciation for the works of other poets, but also writes that sometimes they cannot satisfy him, so he must write his own poetry.

"Antaeus: A Fragment" describes a fight between Heracles and Antaeus. Heracles cannot defeat Antaeus and cannot understand why.

In "The Promisers", Owen awakes on a beautiful morning confident that he will meet a particular man that day, but he searches for this man until dark and never finds him.

"The Fates" discusses the idea that Owen's life is constrained by fate. Owen is convinced that he cannot escape fate and will not grow old, likely because he will die.

In "This is the Track", Owen writes that his life is set on a track which he cannot change. Owen wonders why he should be afraid because he will surely return.

"O World of many Worlds" uses several stanzas from "This is the Track" and deals with similar ideas of fate. Owen feels lost in the world, and that he is distant from other people. Owen compares other people to planets fixed in their motion by gravity, but Owen believes that he is like a meteor without a set course.

In "Song of Songs", Owen implores a woman to sing to him at different times of the day in different ways. For instance, in the morning she is to use her laugh and in the evening her sigh.

"All Sounds have been as Music" is a fragment in which Owen describes the beauty he finds in every sound from bells and bugles to boots on snow.

In "Bugles Sang", Owen describes hearing bugles being played in the evening signaling soldiers to go to sleep. As the evening turns into night the artillery begins to fire.

"1914" describes the outbreak of World War I, which Owen compares to a tornado coming from Germany. The war is the coming of a winter, but there is still the possibility of spring.

In "The One Remains", Owen imagines all the beautiful faces that he has never seen. Owen hopes to find one face that has all beauty in it.



## Pages 115-130 Analysis

"From My Diary, July 1914" is written just before the official outbreak of World War I, and although war was clearly imminent by that point, Owen seems totally unconcerned with it in this poem. This poem is very sweet and pretty, but it lacks substance, which Owen would find later through the war.

"On My Songs" seems to be Owen's justification for writing poetry. Owen argues that his poetry lends comfort to himself and will hopefully comfort others and is therefore worthwhile.

The character Antaeus in "Antaeus: A Fragment" is from Greek mythology and was always strong while touching the ground. Heracles is only able to defeat Antaeus by lifting him off the ground and squeezing him to death.

The poem "The Promisers" is written while Owen is injured in the hospital and reflects a definite disappointment. The poem could be interpreted to refer to Owen's struggle with religion and that the man he is supposed to meet is God.

In the fifth line of the first stanza of "The Fates", Owen writes that men are employed by the fates. Owen is most likely referring to soldiers whose job it is to kill other soldiers, making them like agents of fate.

"This is the Track" also seems to deal with the idea of fate, but Owen may not be referring to fate in any mystical sense. Owen could easily be referring to the simple fact that as a soldier he has almost no choices in his life.

In "O World of many Worlds", Owen sets himself apart from other people as the only person who has free will. However, Owen compares himself to a meteor, and although a meteor behaves more erratically than a planet, it is still guided by the laws of physics. Owen may be perfectly aware of this and is pointing out that though he appears different, he is still just as trapped by fate as anyone else.

"Song of Songs" is a simple romantic poem, but in the last stanza it makes fairly explicit references to sex, which was very controversial in early twentieth century England.

"All Sounds have been as Music" is a simple, celebratory poem, but it does offer some insight into how large a role music played in Owen's early life.

"Bugles Sang" shows that every day on the battlefield only brings more despair. Whereas people usually look at a new day for a reason to hope, Owen presents it as only a new opportunity to die.

In "1914", Owen refers to writes that war destroys people's "thought and feeling" indicating that Owen sees the war as a colossal mistake brought on by a stubborn unwillingness to understand the other side.

"The One Remains" is a simple expression of Owen's desire to find true love.



# Pages 131-144

## Pages 131-144 Summary

In "To the Bitter Sweet-heart: a Dream", Owen falls in love with a girl and the girl reciprocates his love. However, Owen must love the girl at the end of the poem.

In "The Sleeping Beauty", Owen is traveling abroad and discovers a house where a beautiful young woman is sleeping. Owen kisses her eyelids but leaves without waking her.

"Sonnet Autumnal" describes the first day of autumn as a day of mourning for the end of summer. Owen uses the end of summer as an analogy for the end of a love.

"Long Ages Past" discusses an idol to which ancient rulers sacrificed people. Owen believes that this idol intoxicates men and causes them to forget God.

The poem "Purple" is a description of the color. Owen writes that purple is sad but also proud when on a king and also indicative of love.

"Maundy Thursday" describes a church service where people kiss a silver cross and take communion. Owen goes before the altar and kisses the priest's hand instead of the cross.

In "To—", Owen writes about running next to a girl with love between them. Both believe that falling in love will not hurt them, but it takes away their youth.

In the fragment "Spells and Incantation", Owen is shown four different gems—pearls, diamonds, rubies, and amber—which remind him of winter, spring, summer, and autumn, respectively.

"The Imbecile" describes a woman with long hair and green eyes who has committed some wrong but is unaware of it.

The fragment "Beauty" claims that while many people speak of beauty and believe that beauty pleases them, most people do not actually think about it much.

"Bold Horatius" is about a schoolgirl who is studying Roman history in class, but she leaves class to go join three soldiers she sees walking by.

In "Elegy in April and September", Owen searches for a man in the forest and instructs different parts of the natural environment to help him in the endeavor.

In "To a Comrade in Flanders", Owen writes that although soldiers may never reach heaven, they might still return to their homes when they die in the memories of their loved ones.



## Pages 131-144 Analysis

In the ninth line of "To the Bitter Sweet-heart: a Dream", Owen claims that when he is in love he does not grow older, which suggests that love can conquer both time and death.

"The Sleeping Beauty" suggests that Owen idealizes a virginal beauty in women because he thinks it would be wrong to make love to her. This idea is reminiscent of the medieval concept of chivalry.

"Sonnet Autumnal" seems to argue that unlike the seasons, love comes only once in a lifetime because, as Owen writes, there will always be more summer roses but not necessarily another love.

The idol in "Long Ages Past" is most likely war. Owen writes the poem at some point in 1914, so even if the war is yet not begun, it is set to begin very soon. Furthermore, Owen's description of the idol as being like a drug for rulers fits in well with his later descriptions of war.

In the last line of "Purple", Owen describes sex, or at least romance, as "sacred sin", which is seemingly contradictory but implies that although sex can be sinful, it can also be the holiest thing in life.

The title "Maundy Thursday" refers to the Thursday before the crucifixion of Christ. Owen writes that the Christ on the cross is dead possibly implying that his faith is gone.

"To—" seems to argue that young people fall in love easily without recognizing that love will cause them pain and they will lose their innocence.

The fragment "Spells and Incantation" employs a comparison with the four seasons, which is a common theme in several of Owen's poems. Although the "you" is left unidentified in this poem, it is sensible to believe it is a lover, given Owen's intensely passionate language.

The girl Owen describes in "The Imbecile" sounds very beautiful, and Owen seems to know her well and care about her. However, Owen repeatedly refers to her as an imbecile and writes that the girl has done something wrong. For this reason it seems likely that the girl is a former lover with whom Owen is displeased.

The second line of the fragment "Beauty" refers to "Kant", who is an eighteenth century German philosopher. The last two finished lines of the poem suggest that Owen thinks women are vain.

The title "Bold Horatius" refers to a legendary Roman hero. The fourth line of the poem refers to "Macaulay", who is Thomas Babington Macaulay, the author of a book dealing with Horatius. The reason the girl will not greet the soldier named Horace is because that is the name of a famous Roman poet.



Although Owen makes it clear that he is searching for someone in "Elegy in April and September", he never explains who it is. It is reasonable to believe that Owen is searching for God as he refers to a star as belonging to the man.

"To a Comrade in Flanders" contains references to the afterlives of several different religions. Lethe and Styx, mentioned in the third and fourth lines, are both rivers in Hades in Greek mythology. Asgard is the home of the gods in Norse mythology and the location of Valhalla, which is where those who die in combat live in the afterlife.



# Pages 144-165

## Pages 144-165 Summary

The book's first appendix consists of a biography of Owen written by Edmund Blunden in 1931. In the opening paragraph, Blunden writes that many of Owen's poems were destroyed when he sent a number of them to his mother with orders to burn them. However, much of Owen's work that remains was organized by his fellow poet Siegfried Sassoon. Blunden covers several of the same incidents in Owen's early life as Lewis, but Blunden adds that Owen's father took him to visit France twice when Owen was fourteen and sixteen.

Owen's primary literary inspiration in his youth is John Keats, but Owen desires to find another great poet to read. Among Owen's early works, Blunden most admires "Isabella", which is a poetic reworking of Hans Christian Andersen's story "The Little Mermaid".

When Owen enlists in the military, he seems to simultaneously see it as cruel and possibly unnecessary but also only as a minor distraction. Owen immediately complains about the conditions at the front lines upon his arrival, especially the ever present mud. Owen also notices that the other soldiers look like prisoners and writes of sleeping poorly due to the constant firing of artillery. In January of 1917, Owen is involved in his first attack into No Man's Land, where he is stranded with his men for an entire day under constant fire. Also in that month, Owen experiences his first gas attack. Owen soon comes to realize that although people call the dead in war glorious, they are just depressing and their bodies soon smell bad on the field. In April, Owen is involved in an offensive which lasts for twelve days. Owen is unable to bathe, take off his shoes, or sleep properly until the offensive is over.

## Pages 144-165 Analysis

Blunden's biography of Owen reveals that in his early life Owen was simultaneously confident in his abilities but unsure that he could succeed. Owen believes that he would make a good musician, painter, or poet. However, Owen also openly accepts the possibility that he might fail in his endeavors. Furthermore, in one of his letters, Owen reveals himself to be naturally attracted to excitement. This admission raises the question of whether Owen joined the military just for the potential thrill involved.

On page 153, Blunden divides Owen's life as a poet into "Endymion" and "Hyperion" phases. In Greek mythology, Endymion is a beautiful young shepherd and the lover of Selene the moon goddess. Hyperion is a Titan god and the father of Selene. Both names are also titles of poems by Owen's primary literary influence John Keats. Also, on page 157, Owen refers to the front lines as "Gehenna," which is a Hebrew term for hell.





# Pages 165-184

## Pages 165-184 Summary

A doctor forbids Owen from taking part in combat for a few days after he suffers a concussion. When Owen returns to the front, he leads a successful attack on the German lines. However, Owen is still feverish after the attack and is sent back to a hospital on the Somme. Here Owen begins to believe that Christianity is a pacifistic creed. Owen is soon transported to a hospital in Wales and eventually to Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh. While in the hospital, Owen reads a biography of Alfred Lord Tennyson, who Owen finds to be naive because he never suffered through war. Owen also meets fellow poet Siegfried Sassoon in the hospital, and Sassoon soon becomes Owen's mentor and friend. Sassoon's influence makes Owen into a much more mature poet, and Owen becomes attached to Sassoon and the hospital, to the extent that when Owen is discharged, he does not want to leave. Blunden draws on an account of Owen at the hospital from Mary Gray to portray Owen as distant and sad but still rich in spirit.

After leaving the hospital, Owen writes to Sassoon, explaining his admiration for Sassoon and that he misses the hospital. At the end of 1917, Owen writes to his mother, finally convinced that he is a true poet. Owen is still disappointed that he has written so little poetry, but he begins to receive some degree of respect among other writers in 1918. At the end of the summer of 1918, Owen returns to the front, which Sassoon advises Owen will be good for his poetry. On the front, Owen is more frightened by Sassoon's poetry than the actual battles taking place. In late October, Owen leads his men in the last major offensive of the war. On November fourth, Owen and his men attempt to cross the Sambre Canal but are pinned down by German machine gunners. Owen attempts to help the engineers bridge the canal and is shot and killed in the process. Owen's troops crossed the canal on a bridge a few miles south of where Owen is killed. The war ends one week later. Blunden speculates that Owen is not merely a war poet, as he would have met with great success regardless of his subject.

The book concludes with the poem "Wild With all Regrets", which is a reworking of the poem "A Terre" from pages sixty-four through sixty-six. The poem deals with a soldier's wish to have a long life of any kind as opposed to what is likely a short and terrible life in combat.

## Pages 165-184 Analysis

Although Owen clearly spends much of his time while injured thinking about Christianity, it is not at all clear that he actually returns to the faith. Owen comes to believe that Christianity is naturally pacifistic, but he admits that the principle of pacifism could be a bad one even though it is endorsed by Christ. Furthermore, Owen continues to serve as a soldier, indicating that he does not totally embrace pacifism or, therefore, Christianity.

At the end of the poem "Wild with All Regrets", Owen refers to a soldier's "rich breathing, brother..." It is quite likely that Owen is not referring to a person who is monetarily wealthy, but a person who is wealthy because he is alive and not involved in the war.



# Characters

## Wilfred Owen appears in Entire Book

Owen is the author of the poems in this book and a soldier who is killed in World War I. Owen is born Oswestry, England, in 1893, to a middle class family. Owen is especially close with his mother, but his father takes Owen to France twice in his teenage years, which is an experience Owen treasures. Owen is the eldest son with a sister and two brothers, whom he tries to look after. Owen enters London University in 1911, but is unable to afford the tuition. In order to continue his education, Owen becomes an assistant to the vicar in Dunsden. While working in this capacity, Owen loses his Christian faith. At the same time, Owen gains a deep concern for the poor and disadvantaged. Unable to continue working as the vicar's assistant, Owen moves to Bordeaux, France to work as a tutor to for two young boys. While in France, Owen meets Laurent Tailhade, who is the first professional poet Owen comes to know. Tailhade helps Owen with his poetry, and at the outbreak of World War I in 1914, Owen is poised to publish a book of poems.

From the beginning of the war, Owen sees it as a tremendous waste and originally has no intention of joining the military. However, drawn by the excitement of battle and its potential to improve his poetry, Owen joins the British Army in October 1915. Owen is commissioned as an officer and arrives in France at the beginning of 1917. Owen is regarded as fine and brave soldier, but he is injured in the summer of 1917. While in the hospital, Owen meets Siegfried Sassoon, who is already considered the finest poet of World War I. Sassoon becomes both a mentor and friend to Owen. With Sassoon's help, by the time Owen returns to the front in the spring of 1918, he is a well-respected poet in his own right. However, Owen feels he does not have enough time to write, given the constraints of combat. In November of 1918, Owen is killed trying to lead his men across a canal. After his death, Owen is widely considered the best of the British War poets, exceeding even his mentor Sassoon.

## Siegfried Sassoon appears in Introduction and Appendix One

Siegfried Sassoon is another war poet and a friend and mentor to Wilfred Owen. Sassoon is a published poet before the outbreak of World War I and serves in the military as an officer. By the time he is injured and taken to the Craiglockheart War Hospital in Edinburgh, Sassoon is the most celebrated British war poet of his generation. It is in the hospital that Sassoon meets Owen, and the two immediately begin to work closely together. Their relationship begins with Owen taking some of his poems to Sassoon, who gives Owen both criticism and praise for his work. Sassoon soon starts to read Owen his latest works, and the two form a mutually beneficial working relationship. After Owen returns to the front, he writes to Sassoon that he misses the hospital because he can no longer communicate on a daily basis with



Sassoon and benefit from his advice. In one of Owen's letters, he refers to Sassoon as more important than John Keats, Jesus Christ, Elijah, and Owen's colonel in Owen's own life, making Sassoon the most important influence on Owen for the last, but most productive, months of his life. In 1918, Sassoon publishes "Counter-Attack", which Owen finds even more frightening in its description of the war than the war itself. After Owen's death, Sassoon put together the first collection of Owen's war poetry.

## **John Keats appears in Introduction, Appendix One, and**

John Keats is an nineteenth century English Romantic poet and Owen's greatest influence in his youth. In Owen's early life, he desires to be remembered as Keats has been and writes poems in a Romantic style. However, once Owen becomes involved in the war, Keat's influence on him diminishes, and Owen is more drawn to the work of his contemporary Siegfried Sassoon. Owen's work drifts away from the Romanticism of Keats during the war in favor a brutal realism.

## **German Soldier appears in Strange Meeting**

Owen meets a German soldier while retreating from an attack. They both realize that they are in hell, and the German Soldier informs Owen that he killed the German Soldier. The German Soldier tells Owen that he knew him even in the battle and refers to Owen as his friend.

## **Abraham and Isaac appears in The Parable of the Old Man and the Young**

Abraham (referred to in the poem as "Abram") is the Biblical father of Isaac. God orders Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, but as Abraham prepares to sacrifice the boy, God tells him to sacrifice a ram instead. In the Biblical version of the story, Abraham spares Isaac, but in Owen's poem, Abraham still kills Isaac, along with half of Europe's young.

## **Death appears in The Show and The Next War**

Death takes Owen above the battlefield so that Owen can see it from a bird's eye view. The sight of the battle from above terrifies Owen, and he falls back down to earth with Death. Death then takes on the form of a worm and shows Owen his own severed head. Owen realizes that Death is not his enemy and that Death accompanies him constantly during the war.



## **Soldier Killed by Gas appears in Dulce Et Decorum Est**

The Soldier Killed by Gas dies in a horrific way that reminds Owen of someone drowning. The Soldier's body is thrown into a cart, and Owen believes that if other people saw his death they would not be so convinced that it is glorious to die for their country.

## **The Sentry appears in The Sentry**

When Owen and his men take refuge in a dugout, The Sentry finds them and asks to take shelter with them. The Sentry complains that he is blind, so Owen holds a light up to his eyes, which The Sentry cannot see. The Sentry later claims to see a light when there is none, which likely means that The Sentry is dying.

## **The Dead Beat appears in The Dead Beat**

The Dead Beat is a soldier who collapses while marching. Other soldiers speculate that he might be faking an injury, but the stretcher-bearers assure the men something is legitimately wrong with The Dead Beat. The Dead Beat is taken to the hospital, where he dies very quickly.

## **The Suicide appears in S.I.W.**

The Suicide eagerly enlists in the army when the war breaks out, believing it is the honorable thing to do and that death is better than dishonor. One night, when The Suicide is assigned to night watch, he shoots himself with his own rifle.

## **Eros appears in To Eros**

Eros is the Greek god of love, and Owen worships Eros in his youth. Owen sacrifices everything to Eros and soon discovers that he sacrificed all things worth loving.

## **Antaeus and Heracles appears in Antaeus: A Fragment**

Antaeus is a figure in Greek mythology who is stronger than anyone while he is touching the ground. In Owen's poem, Antaeus wrestles Heracles, and Heracles defeats Antaeus by lifting him off the ground and squeezing Antaeus to death.

## **The Imbecile appears in The Imbecile**

The Imbecile is a beautiful girl who has wronged someone, probably Owen. However, The Imbecile is unaware of what she has done and appears innocent and angelic.



## **Comrade in Flanders appears in To a Comrade in Flanders**

The Comrade in Flanders is a friend of Owen's who goes to war before Owen. Owen writes that although they might never see the after lives of any of the traditional religions, they will always be remembered by their families and countrymen back home.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Oswestry, England appears in Introduction and Appendix One**

This is where Wilfred Owen is born on March 18, 1893.

### **London University appears in Introduction and Appendix One**

London University is where Owen enrolls in 1911, but Owen is forced to drop out because he cannot afford the tuition.

### **Dunsden, Oxfordshire, England appears in Introduction and Appendix One**

Dunsden is where Owen moves to become assistant to the local vicar. It is also where Owen loses his Christian faith.

### **Bourdeaux, France appears in Introduction and Appendix One**

Owen moves here to tutor two young boys after leaving Dunsden.

### **Craiglockhart War Hospital appears in Introduction and Appendix One**

Owen is sent to the Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh after being injured in the summer of 1916, and it is here that Owen meets and befriends Siegfried Sassoon.

### **The Ancre**

The Ancre is a river near where Owen engages in a battle. Owen compares the location to the hill where Christ was crucified.



## **Princes Street**

Princes Street is a street in Edinburgh where Owen often walks while in Craiglockhart War Hospital. Owen describes it as being very busy and removed from the sadness of the war in most ways.

## **Cerisy**

Cerisy is place where the River Somme in France bends. Owen describes a hospital barge moving around the bend and being slowly lifted by a lock to move down the river.

## **Flanders**

Flanders is a region in France and Belgium where one of Owen's friends is serving in the war. Owen writes to this friend to tell him that they will be remembered by their loved ones if they die.

## **Broxton by the Hill appears in Appendix One**

Broxton by the Hill is where Owen claims he was first inspired to be a poet when he was still a boy.

## **The Sambre Canal appears in Appendix One**

Owen is killed at the Sambre Canal while trying to lead his men across the waterway.





# Themes

## War as a Tragedy

The most important theme in Owen's work is that war is usually pointless and a waste of life, waged for the pride of politicians. Even before Owen becomes an active participant in the war, he believes that it will destroy many of his generation's best minds that could have advanced civilization if they were not killed. However, before he is actually a soldier, Owen also writes that the war could cut down the population in some useful way. Once Owen becomes a soldier himself, he gains sympathy for all the soldiers involved, including ones that are supposed to be his enemy. In "Strange Meeting", Owen describes meeting a German soldier that he killed in hell. The fact that they are meeting in hell indicates that Owen believes the war to be an essentially evil enterprise. Furthermore, the dead German soldier refers to Owen as his friend, indicating that Owen believes that the Germans and English are only enemies because politicians force them to be and that soldiers have more in common with each other than their leaders, regardless of which country they are from. In "The Parable of the Old Man and the Young", Owen describes the war as an unnecessary slaughter of all the young men of Europe by the old in defiance of God's wishes. Although Owen may not have been a religious believer at the time he wrote the poem, he still presents the war in terms of a sin against God. Abraham in the poem is supposed to represent the older, and therefore more powerful men of Europe. Owen sees the war as evil and foolish.

## The False Glory of War

Owen believes many soldiers were originally motivated to serve in World War I by the idea of glory, both for themselves personally and for their country. However, many soldiers, Owen included, quickly discover that there is no glory in war once they actually see battle. In Owen's incomplete preface to his poems, Owen writes that his poetry is not about heroism or glory but just war. Owen even claims that the English language is incapable of speaking of heroes. The preface strongly suggests that Owen finds no glory in the war or the concept of war.

In Owen's most famous poem "Dulce Et Decorum Est", he contemptuously dismisses the idea that a soldier dying for his country is glorious. The poem mostly describes a soldier dying in a gas attack, which appears to Owen like a man drowning. The soldier's body is then simply thrown into a cart to be brought back to the trenches. Owen finds the whole ordeal deeply disturbing. At the end of the poem, Owen quotes the Roman poet Horace, "Dulce et decorum est/Pro patria moria", which means roughly that "it is sweet and glorious to die for your fatherland". Owen calls this quote "the old Lie", and argues that if people had seen the horrors soldiers see on a daily basis at the front, they would not believe it either. Owen does not find glory in war but only death, destruction, and pity.



## Doubt in Christianity

Owen renounces Christianity several years before going to war, but Owen's poetry makes clear that he continues to struggle with his faith and lack thereof until the end of his life. In "At a Calvary near the Ancre", Owen makes it clear that people who truly follow the teachings of Christ must love each other and therefore could not kill each other. It is people's obedience to the state that causes war. However, in "Le Christianisme", Owen writes of a church that has been hit repeatedly with artillery. One statue of the Virgin Mary remains undamaged, but Owen writes that it too will soon be destroyed by the war. The destruction of the church suggests that God is powerless to stop the war, even to defend his own buildings and icons. Owen goes even further in his doubt in "Soldier's Dream". Owen dreams that Jesus disables all the weapons of the war, but when Owen awakes he finds that God empowered the archangel Michael to repair all the weapons. This poem argues that God is not powerless to intervene in the war but he is instead actually making the war last longer. These poems make it clear that Owen alternates between faith in the goodness of Christianity, a belief in the religion's futility, and blaming God for the war.



# Style

## Point of View

In Owen's poetry, he uses a number of different points of view, but most commonly, Owen uses a first person perspective with presumably himself as the narrator. It is not entirely certain that Owen himself is meant to be the narrator in these poems because he almost never gives names to his narrator. Furthermore, the narrator in these poems is almost always a passive observer and rarely takes part in the major action of the poem. For instance, in Owen's most famous poem "Dulce Et Decorum Est", Owen watches another soldier die in a gas attack. While Owen describes the narrator putting on his own gas mask and walking behind the cart with the soldier's dead body, the main action of the poem focuses on the death of the other soldier. A major exception to this general rule is found in "Strange Meeting", where the narrator retreats from a battle only to run into a German soldier he killed the day before, which causes the narrator to realize that he is in hell. Also, in the poem "The Letter", Owen is clearly not meant to be the narrator. The narrator in this instance is a soldier writing a letter to his wife in cockney style. Both facts indicate that the narrator is meant to be an enlisted soldier and not Owen himself.

The vast majority of the poems that do not employ first person narration use a third person omniscient point of view where the narrator is completely removed from the action but understands everything that is happening.

## Setting

The overwhelming bulk of Owen's poems are set on the front lines of World War I in France. These lines are marked by long trenches on both sides, which are used for defense. In between these trenches lies an area referred to as "No Man's Land". This area is extremely dangerous because there are few places to escape from enemy fire or artillery, but soldiers are frequently ordered across No Man's Land to capture the enemy trench. This attack is referred to as going "Over the Top". No Man's Land is pockmarked with large holes from constant artillery barrages. Owen highlights both the danger of No Man's Land and his struggles with Christianity when he claims that Jesus Christ is stuck in No Man's Land because of Christ's pacifistic views. The overriding feature of the trenches that Owen records is the mud. Everything on the front lines is covered in mud because combat has destroyed all vegetation, so the ground simply absorbs all moisture. Furthermore, Owen's poems frequently describe the weather as rainy, but this description may be more for poetic effect than realism. Owen also describes the battlefield as extremely cold, which is understandable because Owen is injured for most of the summer months during his military service. The cold is so bitter that Owen writes of several men dying of it. In short, Owen's primary setting is dreary, freezing cold, and extremely violent.



## Language and Meaning

Owen's language in his war poetry is removed but still bitter and angry. Owen almost never refers to the narrator or the characters in his war poems by name, which suggests a mental distance between the poet and his subjects. Owen's refusal to use names for most of his characters also shows the isolating effect of the war. Soldiers arrive at the front as strangers to the veterans who are already there, and it is often pointless to get to know the new arrivals as they may be injured or killed the very next day. Similarly, Owen does not seem to see a point in naming soldiers who simply die in a gas attack or freeze to death. Still, while Owen's language gives his war poems a feeling of distance, his descriptions are incredibly rich, which reveals Owen's strong emotional reaction against the war. For instance, in "Dulce Et Decorum Est," Owen writes that the soldiers marched "knock-kneed, coughing like hags," and the dead soldier's face is "like a devil's sick of sin" and that his lungs are "forth-corrupted" (p. 55). Owen states explicitly at the end of the poem that it is not glorious to die for one's country, but Owen's use of strong descriptive terms make his feelings obvious without such a direct statement.

## Structure

The book is divided into three main sections. The first is an introduction written by the book's editor C. Day Lewis, and it primarily consists of a short biography of Owen and some brief remarks on Owen's poetic style. The next section consists of Owen's poems, and is itself divided into three smaller parts. As Lewis makes clear in the introduction, the poems are not organized in strict chronological order but more by theme. The first collection of Owen's poems is his war poems, which are all written after the outbreak of World War I in 1914 and mostly written after Owen arrives in France as a soldier in December of 1916. The next collection of poems is called "Other Poems, and Fragments". Many of these poems are also about the war and written during Owen's military service. However, several of these poems deal with love, and many have not been completed. The final collection of poems is Owen's "Minor Poems, and Juvenalia". Some of these poems are written during the war, but the vast majority are written in Owen's youth and deal with religion and love. Each poem is accompanied by some short comments from Lewis and sometimes an alternate text for the poem. After the poems, the first appendix is a biography of Owen by Edmund Blunden, which is first published in 1931.



## Quotes

"While it is true that the guns will effect a little useful weeding, I am furious with chagrin to think that the Minds, which were to have excelled the civilization of two thousand years, are being annihilated—and bodies, the products of aeons of Natural Selection, melted down to pay for political statues." Introduction, p. 19

"I am the enemy you killed, my friend/I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned/Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed." Strange Meeting, p. 36

"Merry it was to laugh there—/Where death becomes absurd and life absurder." Apologia Pro Poemate Meo, p. 39

"But the old man would not so, but slew his son,/And half the seed of Europe, one by one." The Parable of the Old Man and the Young, p. 42

"For God's invincible spring our love is made afraid;/Therefore, not loath, we lie out here; therefore were born,/For love of God seems dying." Exposure, p. 49

"My friend, you would not tell with such high zest/To children ardent for some desperate glory,/The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est/Pro patria mori." Dulce Et Decorum Est, p. 55

"—O what made fatuous sunbeams toil/To break earth's sleep at all?" Futility, p. 58

"Little I'd ever teach a son, but hitting,/Shooting, war, hunting, all the arts of hurting. Well, that's what I learnt,—that, and making money." A Terre, p. 64

"But they who love the greater love/Lay down their life; they do not hate." At a Calvary near the Ancre, p. 82

"Boys' griefs are not so grievous as our yearning,/Boys have no sadness sadder than our hope." Happiness, p. 93

"Not more complex the millions of the stars/Than are the hearts of mortal brothers;/As far remote as Neptune from small Mars/Is one man's nature from another's." O World of many Worlds, p. 124

"The Christ was thin, and cold, and very dead;/And yet I bowed, yea, kissed—my lips did cling/(I kissed the warm live hand that held the thing.)" Maundy Thursday, p. 136

"This morning I was hit! We were bombing, and a fragment from somewhere hit my thumb knuckle. I coaxed out one drop of blood. Alas! no more!!! There is a fine heroic feeling about being in France, and I am in perfect spirits. A tinge of excitement is about me, but excitement is always necessary for my happiness." Memoir, p. 155

"The people of England needn't hope. They must agitate." Memoir, p. 161



## Topics for Discussion

Owen struggled with religion throughout his life. Do you believe there is more evidence in Owen's poems to support the idea that Owen returned to his Christian faith during the war or more evidence to indicate that Owen remained a non-believer? Justify your answer with references to Owen's poems.

How does Owen see the idea that war is glorious?

Owen's poetry make it obvious that he believes the war is a tragedy. Using evidence from Owen's poems, who does Owen blame for the tragedy of the war?

How does Owen view enemy soldiers?

How does Owen portray God's interactions with the war?

The title of Owen's poem "Apologia Pro Poemate Meo" translates to something like "a defense of my poems". How does Owen defend his poetry in this poem?

How does Owen's view of the war change, if at all, from the outbreak of hostilities to his death in battle?

Before the beginning of the war, Owen's primary topic for poetry is love. How does Owen describe love in these poems?

Love remains a fairly prominent theme even in Owen's war poems, but how does Owen's conception of love change from his youth to his military service?

Do you agree with Owen that there is no glory in dying for one's country? Why or why not?