

ENGLISH

TOPIC: STRANGE MEETING

- 1.
2. Central idea: Strange Meeting does not glorify war, rather it explores the horror, the terror behind the facile optimism of war. Owen wants to strike at the conscience of the people of England as well as the world in regard to the continuance of war.
3. The poem was written in 1918 and it was published in 1919. Deals with the atrocities of World War I.
4. The poem is reminiscent of Shelley's 'The Revolt of Islam' which also depicts a journey through a strange land.
5. Owen got the title from 'The Revolt of Islam.' Herein Shelley says-
And one whose spear had pierced me
Leaned beside,
With quivering lips and humid eyes- and
All
Seemed likesome bothers on a journey
Wide
Gone forth, whom now strange meeting
Did befall
In a strange land.

Owen's strange meeting also takes place in a strange land, though here it is not in our own world but in the underworld, the afterlife. The speaker identifies it as Hell.

6. Owen uses SLANT RHYMED COUPLETS in irregular iambic pentameter. Eg, Hall/Hell, Moan/Mourn, hair/hour...these words sound a lot alike, even if they don't exactly rhyme.
7. The theme of the pity of war is presented through an imaginary discussion between two soldiers of the rival camps who seem to meet in hell. The English soldier falls in a dream and fancies himself passing out of the battlefield through some underground tunnel.
8. Owen's attitude to war: anti-war poem. Advocates against war.
9. "It seemed that out of battle I escaped."- The English soldier(Owen) says this.

Seeing the atrocities of war the speaker made an escape from the battlefield. The whole thing occurs in a trance like state.

Reminds of Shaw who said "self preservation is the fundamental instinct of life." No soldier wants to get killed. Seems the speaker has found a way out. The verb 'seems' suggests it happens in dream or trance like state.

10. "Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped Through granites which Titanic war had groined."

Tunnel here refers to the dark gloomy chambers where soldiers are buried.

“Titanic wars’ are the wars on a massive Scale in which heavy casualties were sustained.

The tunnel (which was made of granites) is hell which was created when God expelled the Titans, a gigantic race who rebelled against God.

11. ‘Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned’ → ‘Sleepers here refer to the soldiers who are now buried in the dark underground chamber.

‘encumbered’ means huddled together. The suggestion is that the dead bodies lie in heaps.

A few of the dead bodies are found to groan, while others lie stiff and rigid. With a touch of irony the poet says that this utter motionlessness is either due to the thought of their unhappy lot i.e., they were yet experiencing the horrors of war or due to death.

12. “Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.”-

The expression implies that the dead soldiers were motionless either in the thought of their unhappy lot because war has claimed their lives or due to death itself.

13. “Then as I probed them, one sprang up.”- The English soldier(i.e., Owen) says this. In a dream he passed into a dark tunnel where he met a large number of sleepers lost in death. He poked them and one(here the dead German soldier) of them sprang up.

14. “Stared with piteous recognition in fixed eyes/ lifting distressful hands as if to bless.”-

‘Fixed eyes’ suggest the look of the dead. The eyes of the German soldier is referred to here.

The dead German soldier lifts his distressful hands. His hands are distressful because they had a association with the pity of war .

The dead German Soldier blesses his enemy because a sense of profound pity seizes him. He now realizes the bitter truth -the truth that war places false division among mankind.

15. "And by his smile I knew that sullen hall/ By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell!" –

'Sullen hall here meters to the dark gloomy chambers (hell) where the soldiers are buried.

Dead smile is an example of oxymoron. If one is dead, he cannot smile. In this case it depicts the emptiness of the soldier's soul and it is too full of pathos. The dead German soldier smiles because a sense of profound pity has now seized his mind and he has now realised the truth that war places false division among mankind. So, smile suggests they are now above enmity.

The poet without being oblique calls the place hell to suggest that war is a crime against humanity and those who fight to kill and get killed must go to hell.

16. "With a thousand fears that vision's face was grained/ Yet no blood ..." - the expression means the dead German soldier's face looked like as if it was made of thousand fears. This was because he was yet experiencing the horrors of war even though the place he was in now i.e., the tunnel was free from bloodshed, or no sound of gunshot was heard there.

17. Strange friend, I said, "here is no cause to mourn" –

'Here' here refers to the tunnel where the soldiers are buried and the poet associates it with hell.

In hell, there is no cause to mourn because – i)they are free from the scenes of bloodshed ii) they are free from the sound of gunshots iii)they are far away from the moaning sound of war flute.

18. “None”, said the other, “save the undone years.”-

The other is the strange friend i.e., the dead German soldier.

The strange friend replies to the young soldier’s assertion that here is no sorrow in hell. He says that the only sorrow for him is that he might have lived on earth for some years but for this killing in war. He is full of sorrow because of his inability to do any good to the world.

So the ‘undone years’ refer to his unfulfilled vision in his life. ‘save’ means except.

19. “The hopelessness.”- The hopelessness of the dead soldier refers to his despair because of his inability to do good to the world.

20. “Whatever hope is yours / Was my life also.”- The dead German soldier says this to the English soldier. His hope to do good to the world lie buried with him in the tunnel unlike the English soldier who still being alive can lend a meaningful contribution to the civilisation.

21. “I went hunting wildly / After the wildest beauty in the world....braided hair.”-

The dead German soldier says this. The wildest beauty i.e., the beauty the speaker looked for was not really a physical beauty. It is not the beauty of calm eyes or braided hair of fair girls.

May be it was a deeper beauty – the beauty one finds in art and literature or the beauty in peace and truth.

22. "But mocks the steady running of the hour." - the steady running of the hour perhaps refers to the constant passage of time where 'the ignorant armies clash by night.' The beauty pursued by the dead German soldier mocks the steady running of the hour because it cannot be perceived the 'vacant brains.'

23. "If it grieves, it grieves richer than here." -

"It" here refers the beauty pursued by the dead German soldier.

It grieves because it has not been realised.

The sorrow is greater in hell because it is an ineffective vain regret.

On earth there is still scope for further attempt to realise it.

24. "For my glee might many men have laughed/ And of my weeping something been left/ Which must die now." -

The dead German soldier is still relating his regrets here.

The relative pronoun 'which' here either refers to the beauty pursued by him or to his bitter realisation of the truth about war.

He means not only did he miss out this by being cut short of his life but also other people missed it out in missing him. His happiness could have caused others' happiness. Laughter is contagious after all.

25. "I mean the truth untold./ The pity of war, the pity war distilled." -

The 'truth' here is the horrors of war i.e., the naked reality of war.

The truth remains untold because the realiser is now dead. Power of communication is the special prerogative of men and the dead are devoid of it.

The pity of war refers to the sympathetic consciousness of the destruction wrought by war.

The enemy soldier ruminates on how the truth of war- the pity of it- is quelled when the soldiers die. The German soldier laments that it was his mission to distill the truth of war. But he being dead now, he cannot disseminate the truth about war.

26. "Now men will go content with what we spoiled/ Or discontent , boil bloody, and be spilled."-

Owen here speaks about the time to come. He means future generations will not learn any lesson from the atrocities of war. By 'with what we spoiled' means the same romantic ways of thought and action which were responsible for colossal war will remain among men.

By 'boil bloody and be spilled' he means they will be involved in bloodshed and will be destroyed.

27. "They will be swift with the swiftness of the tigress/ None will break rank s, though nations trek from progress."-

Owen here stands out as a prophet and presumes that in future men will continue bloody wars. They would be swift in attacking and destroying each-other. The all pervasive destruction caused by war will surely halt and hamper the progress of civilisation.

The mention of tigress brings out the cruelty, hunger and swiftness of future war. Figure of speech used in the comparison is metaphor.

28. By "None will break rank s, though nations trek from progress" the poet means no nation will stand against the false ideals of war and dissolve army with a view to ban war. Instead they will continue to fight skilfully and dutifully even though their nations will make a retreating journey from progress because of the destruction caused by war.

29. "Courage was mine and I had mystery/ Wisdom was mine and I had mastery."-

The dead German soldier says this. He goes in flashback and speaks about the days of his soldiering. At that time, as a soldier he felt he was courageous and wise and he had the full command over the needs of the situation. He had the knowledge, the capacity and supreme self-restraint to expose the truth of war. But he being cut short of his life, he was not given the opportunity to teach mankind the truth about the pity of war.

30. "To miss the march of this retreating world."-

Owen considers war to be the march of this retreating world for it creates false ideals- ideals of military strength, militant nationalism and supremacy of state. Paradoxically enough these ideals lead to the slaughter of innumerable youth which in turn causes the nations retreat from progress.

The dead German soldier means he had the courage and wisdom as well to go against this march of nation.

31. "Vain citadels that are not walled."

Vain citadels here stand for the false ideals of military strength, militant nationalism and supremacy of state. These ideals are worthless and undependable as forts having no surrounding walls. Instead of giving security, they function as a threat to greater humanity. Metaphor.

It is love, peace and fellow feeling which can give ultimate security to men and nations.

32. "Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot- wheels/ I would go up and wash them from sweet wells/ Even with truths that lie too deep for taint."-

Chariot wheels here refer to the progress of mankind. The false ideals- ideals of military strength, militant nationalism and supremacy of state delude men into engaging them in bloody warfare which causes immense bloodshed, and this in turn clog the progress of nation economically and on the ground that those innocent youths who get killed might have lended a meaningful contribution to the civilisation.

The progress of nation has been compared with wheels of chariot. Metaphor. Owen predicts that the time will come when the wheels of chariot of so called progress will be clogged and obstructed by blood of men they have killed.

‘Sweet wells’ refer to the truths about war discovered through bitter experiences. The truth is the pity of war which the strange friend has experienced.

The German soldier had the hope of teaching mankind the truth about the pity of war.

33. “truths that lie too deep for taint.”-

The truth is that war is not a glorious deed but an abominable curse upon mankind. It is a universal truth. The truth is so pure and elemental that it cannot be corrupted by any vicious doctrine of hate and warfare.. ‘That lie too deep for taint’ means no agreement , no idea can reach there to corrupt it.

34. “I would have poured my spirit without stint/ But not through wounds, not on the cess of war.”-

‘Without stint’ means without restriction. The dead German soldier means had he remained alive he would have poured all of him into life to work for peace and progress of mankind instead of participating in war. He refers to war as a ‘cess’ or curse.

35. "Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were."

The strange friend means that soldiers have suffered mental and emotional anguish as much as physical pain, and the mental and emotional wounds do not heal easily. He is a proof of that.

36. "I am the enemy you killed, my friend."-

The dead German soldier here addresses the English soldier who killed him as his friend.

A sense of profound has now ceased him. He has now realised the truth about the false ideals which create false divisions among mankind and make them find. So, he addresses his enemy as his friend.

37. "I knew you in this dark."

This 'dark' refers to the dark tunnel where the German soldier lies buried.

38. "...you frowned/ Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed./ I parried; but hands were loath and cold."

The German soldier was killed the day before his meeting with the English soldier.

The English soldier jabbed / stabbed the German soldier.

By 'I parried' the German soldier means he avoided to attack. This may be for two reasons- a) he realised the pity of war and a sense of profound pity seized his mind. b) on being jabbed he was physically unable to retaliate.

39. "my hands were loath and cold."

Apparently it may mean that when the English soldier attacked physically on his throat, his hands became loath and cold for the cessation of his breathing or stopping of blood circulation. Symbolically, a sense of profound pity seized his mind. so, he found it unnecessary to take revenge.

40. "Let us sleep now."

Here there is the Christian idea of resurrection. The dead German soldier invites his enemy friend to sleep only to be resurrected into a world of brotherhood where there shall be love free from hatred.

41. Christ image has been suggested through- a)lifting distressful hands as if to bless b)but not through wounds c) foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were.