Attack

POEM TEXT

At dawn the ridge emerges massed and dun
In the wild purple of the glow'ring sun,
Smouldering through spouts of drifting smoke that shroud
The menacing scarred slope; and, one by one,
Tanks creep and topple forward to the wire.
The barrage roars and lifts. Then, clumsily bowed
With bombs and guns and shovels and battle-gear,
Men jostle and climb to meet the bristling fire.
Lines of grey, muttering faces, masked with fear,
They leave their trenches, going over the top,
While time ticks blank and busy on their wrists,
And hope, with furtive eyes and grappling fists,
Flounders in mud. O Jesus, make it stop!

SUMMARY

In the morning, the top of the trenches appears. It is earthy and grey-brown under the strange purple sunshine, which burns through the smoke that covers the frightening and misshapen hill. Tanks appear, one after the other, tentatively and awkwardly moving towards the barbed wire. The artillery guns fire noisily. After this, men, bent under the weight of all the weapons and equipment they are carrying, start pushing and climbing towards the battle, most likely to be hit in a flail of bullets. Rows of pale faces, mumbling and full of fear, leave the trenches by climbing over the top. On their wristwatches, time ticks away busily and unknowingly. Hope, with darting eyes and flailing fists, struggles in the mud. Jesus, please let it end soon!

THEMES

THE HORRORS OF WAR

"Attack" aims to convey the horror, suffering, and sheer senselessness of war before ending on a simple and dramatic plea—to "make it stop!" Written by Siegfried Sassoon—who served as a soldier in World War I—the poem shows the devastating effects of such conflicts on the young men involved, and is, of course, partly based on Sassoon's own experiences. The poem builds a sense of absurdity that seems to question the purpose of war in the first place, suggesting that it's not only horrific, but also fundamentally meaningless.

The young men in the poem fight in what feels like an almost alien landscape. This heightens the sense that these soldiers are a long way from home, but also suggests that this conflict is far removed from what the speaker sees as normal human behavior. In other words, it's as though the soldiers are in some alternate, absurd reality where, for instance, the "sun" is "purple" (perhaps because of the way it shines through the smoke from ammunition). Even the tanks—normally a symbol of the fearsome power of war—seem kind of clumsy here. They "creep and topple forward" towards enemy lines, highlighting the haphazardness of armed conflict—and heightening the poem's overall sense of warfare as being totally absurd.

The soldiers, too, take on this clumsiness, which stands for a kind of meaninglessness and lack of purpose. They are made heavy by the weapons and tools that they have to carry because of the war, turning these men into easy targets. This highlights the way that the First World War was a horrible kind of numbers game: technology had advanced humankind's methods of killing, and the only way to conduct warfare was to throw men into "the bristling fire."

As the poem depicts soldiers going over the trenches to most likely meet their deaths, it uses two key instances of personification. Time ticks "busy" on the men's wristwatches, indicating the frantic and chaotic reality of war. But time is also "blank"—indifferent, unknowing, and unfeeling—about what is happening. Time is a kind of witness to the war, in the sense that these events will mark themselves deeply *into* time as history. However, time is incapable of *understanding* the events themselves. This might represent the inability of political leaders to grasp the true horrors of life on the battlefield).

Hope—the other personified figure in the poem—is like one of the soldiers itself. It senses that it is in danger, fighting desperately like a soldier with "furtive eyes and grappling fists." Hope, "flounder[ing] in the mud," is itself dying. Sassoon seems to be highlighting the devastating consequences of war that go well beyond the immediate conflict; this line suggests that war destroys humanity's hope more generally, in addition to harming the specific men involved.

All in all, then, it's understandable that the speaker of the poem, who himself seems to be a witness to the fighting, pleads with "Jesus" to "make it stop." But the reference to "Jesus" doesn't introduce any sense of hope into the poem, instead highlighting the huge gulf between the promises of religion—peace, community, joy and so on—and the absurd horror of what the speaker (and the reader) witnesses on the battlefield.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-13

NATURE AND WARFARE

"Attack" depicts a desperate world in which humanity's technological advances have outgrown humanity's ability to keep the use of these technologies in check. This gruesome machinery of warfare has a devastating effect on the landscape where the soldiers fight. The poem, then, subtly suggests that wars don't just harm the *people* who fight in them, but that they harm the *environment* in which they're fought, too. War makes humanity less connected to the world in which it lives, the poem argues; it metaphorically transforms the planet into a kind of threatening and alienating place, rather than a more familiar and comforting home.

The poem opens with "dawn." Normally, dawn is associated with beauty and new beginnings: the birds singing their songs, dew on the grass, the brightness of the morning sun, and so on. The natural world is also often associated with paradise and humankind's natural state (such as in the Garden of Eden in the Bible)—one that has been lost. But *this* dawn instead shines on an uncanny and barely recognizable world. The "ridge" in the earth is a browny-grey corpse color ("dun"). The sun is not its usual shade, but "wild" (an adjective that indicates a kind of widespread savagery) and "purple." This might be because the sun is shining through the lingering smoke of fired weapons and bombs, and the description highlights that things are not as they are meant to be.

The strange colors and general atmosphere also speak to the way humankind alienates itself from its own world through warfare. Indeed, instead of morning mist to accompany the dawn there are only "spouts of drifting smoke" from weaponry. Such is the pain and evil of warfare that the "slope" now appears "menacing" and "scarred"—as though it seeks some kind of revenge for the injuries inflicted on it. Again, this speaks to a breakdown in the relationship between humanity and the world in which it lives.

In the poem's closing moments, it again refers to something more natural—the "mud" in which the personified "hope" now helplessly "flounders." This is a subtle shift in focus back to the earth, reminding the reader that war gravely affects the natural world as well as the people who actually fight. Perhaps more widely this aimlessness of hope suggests the collective failure of humanity's imagination: rather than conceiving of the earth as a communal home, different nations go to war with one another, causing untold damage to both themselves and the land.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4

- Lines 12-13

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

At dawn the ridge emerges massed and dun
In the wild purple of the glow'ring sun,
Smouldering through spouts of drifting smoke that shroud
The menacing scarred slope;

Siegfried Sassoon's "Attack" is a kind of subversive take on an aubade—a poem written to celebrate and evoke the morning. Of course, this is no happy scene, but the heart of a battle in the First World War (in which Sassoon himself served). Up until the caesura in line 4, the poem focuses entirely on the landscape in which the battle takes place. There are, at this early stage, no soldiers in sight (though the "ridge" and "spouts of drifting smoke" hint at what is taking place).

This section, then, is like the establishing shot of a movie. Sassoon is keen to evoke not just the senselessness of war and its grotesque waste of human life, but also something of its weirdness. These lines conjure an almost alien landscape, where the ground is "massed and dun" (wedged-together and grey) and the "glow'ring sun" is a "wild purple" color.

The consonance and alliteration in these first two lines instinctively evoke a landscape, but it's as though something is not quite right, and the place is not as it seems:

> At dawn the ridge emerges massed and dun
> In the wild purple of the glow'ring sun,

The tight organization in the sounds of these lines is deliberately obvious, perhaps mimicking a more typical poetic discussion of some beautiful scene: a flourishing field, maybe, or a coast. But purple is a distinctly unusual color for the sun, "wild" purple even more so. This might actually be more literal than it first appears, relating to the odd hue that sunlight takes on when shining through smoke such as that emitted by guns, grenades, and tank-fire. The "emerge[nce]" of the "ridge"—which is the top of the trench over which most men will meet their death or serious injury—mirrors the way that the men too will have to emerge into the heat of the battle, once the order is given.

Lines 3 and 4 continue on from the first two, describing the smoke that drifts over and through the battle scene. The alliteration and consonance are intense and obvious, showing the way that the smoke dominates the landscape:

> Smouldering through spouts of drifting smoke that shroud

The menacing scarred slope

The /s/ and /sh/ sounds here (also known as sibilance) fill the line as though hiding the other letters, conveying the smoke's effect on the surrounding environment.

Line 4 characterizes the "slope" as both "menacing" and "scarred." Both of these words can be interpreted as personification, with "menacing" representing the aggression and bloodlust of war, and "scarred" relating to injury and pain. In a literal sense, these opening lines highlight the effect that warfare has on the earth itself, pushing the poem's scope beyond a sole focus on the human cost. But in making the landscape feel uncanny and almost like an alien planet, it reminds the reader of the far-reaching *global* effects of the First World War, the way that war can turn a comforting home—the entirety of the Earth, even—into an unfamiliar world.

LINES 4-6

and, one by one,
Tanks creep and topple forward to the wire.
The barrage roars and lifts.

The caesura in line 4—the first in the poem—marks a shift away from the opening scene-setting. It's as though the poem is zooming-in, starting with landscape and now moving on to the tanks (before looking at the soldiers themselves). Like the descriptions of the battlefield in the previous lines, there is something weird and off-kilter about the tanks. "Creep" and "topple" are not words that seem like they'd normally be associated with these hunks of murderous metal—they're more like verbs that might describe the movements of insects.

This is part of the poem's efforts to *defamiliarize* the environment of war in order to make it feel more real. That is, there is very little attempt to paint a heroic scene of the sort that might be found in the patriotic poetry of Sassoon's fellow countryman, Rupert Brooke. War is strange—and so this poem tries to reflect that. These tanks are heading to the "wire"—this is the barbed wire placed on the ground in an effort to slow down the progress of enemy combatants. It's worth noting that barbed wire was originally invented to prevent livestock from escaping their confines—which is an interesting thought given the cattle-like slaughter of young lives in the First World War.

The "barrage" that takes place in line 6 refers to artillery fire. This was ammunition fired from large guns in support of the advancing soldiers, but it was of course chaotic and prone to inaccuracy. The loud /r/ consonance in the phrase "the barrage roars" evokes the noise of the artillery guns.

LINES 6-8

Then, clumsily bowed
With bombs and guns and shovels and battle-gear,
Men jostle and climb to meet the bristling fire.

The full-stop caesura in line 6 marks a key shift in the poem, as the soldiers finally make their entrance (almost halfway through the poem!). They are desperate, almost comical figures, wobbling under the weight of their packs, in a way unsuited to the realities of war. The line itself is "clumsily bowed"—the meaning is suspended by the enjambment ("bowed / With bombs ..."), so that the grammatical *subject* of the phrase started in line 6 doesn't arrive until line 8.

Alliteration, consonance, and the use of polysyndeton are important features of this section:

... Then, clumsily bowed
With bombs and guns and shovels and battle-gear,
Men jostle and climb to meet the bristling fire.

The alliteration of /b/ sounds gives a sense of just how much the men have to carry, while the repeated "and[s]" (polysyndeton) make this sound like an unending list. The consonance of the /m/ sound, meanwhile, evokes the way in which the men themselves are packed in together (like their equipment), "jostl[ing]" for space in which to "climb."

LINES 9-11

Lines of grey, muttering faces, masked with fear,
They leave their trenches, going over the top,
While time ticks blank and busy on their wrists,

Lines 9 and 10 focus on the men themselves. The soldiers are grey-faced, and so numerous as to be almost anonymous (a detail that conveys the incredible number of people involved in the First World War). The "grey" color on their faces echoes the "dun" color of the landscape mentioned in line 1—both are corpse-like, suggesting the way that death rules this terrible conflict. Alliteration is used once again here as well:

Lines of grey, muttering faces, masked with fear,

The alliteration helps suggest the numerousness of the young men going "over the top," and the anxious-sounding caesuras in this line and the next have a fearful tentativeness to match the men's mood.

There is also a subtle but intentionally cruel joke with the word "masked": during the First World War, soldiers frequently needed to wear masks in case of gas attacks—but here their faces are only "masked with fear." For many of these men, "going over" the top of the trench will be the last act of their life. The assonance of the two /o/ sounds in "going over" has a kind of muscular toughness to it, suggesting the physical and mental effort required to go through with the order to charge.

Line 11 then mixes the down-to-earth focus on the men with a more abstract reflection on time. The men wear watches on which "time ticks" (the alliterating /t/ sounds giving the phrase its own ticking sound). But time "ticks blank and busy on their

wrists"—two traits not usually associated with time. On the one hand, the busy-ness of time evokes the frantic chaos of the battlefield, lifetimes going by in seconds, and seconds seeming to last lifetimes. But time is also "blank," acting as a kind of witness to what is happening but removed from the world of human emotion. Time has a "blank" face as it looks out on this terrible scene—leaving the reader to fill in the emotional response, and to wonder if humankind might have found its own "blank[ness]" through war.

LINES 12-13

> *And hope, with furtive eyes and grappling fists,*
> *Flounders in mud. O Jesus, make it stop!*

Line 12 picks up on line 11's use of an abstract concept (time) and turns its attention to "hope." Hope is personified, and in fact becomes a kind of soldier figure. It has "furtive eyes" because it is perhaps hoping to avoid being killed, and "grappling fists" because it too is engaged in a kind of combat (against the hopelessness of war). Furtiveness can also relate to a kind of guilt, perhaps suggesting that hope has abandoned these young men (and in turn owes them a kind of debt).

The personified hope "flounders in the mud," as if blind and speechless. This relates to the nature of this kind of warfare, which was most of the time a kind of guessing game, shooting in the general direction of the enemy and "grappling" with unseen figures. The reference to "mud" also draws the poem back to its opening focus on landscape and the natural world. This "mud" is in part man-made, the earth churned up by the violence of warfare.

The poem concludes on a distinctly desperate and unpoetic note: "O Jesus, make it stop!" This uses apostrophe in appealing to Jesus (also a kind of allusion). But the comforts of religion seem hollow and distant from the scene described by the poem, with little sense that the speaker makes this call out of any genuine hope. Rather, it is an expression of desperation and hopelessness. This final sentence calls to a moral authority, while at the same time ironically highlighting the *absence* of such authority.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is a key feature of "Attack." It is first used in the very first line, with the shared /d/ of "dawn" and "dun." Though these words are far apart, the similar consonant /n/ sound makes the alliteration helps more prominent, so that the words actually half rhyme. The alliteration here works as a kind of contrast: "dawn" is often, in poems at least, a visually beautiful time of day. But the poem's first color is "dun"—which is a kind of brown-grey. This hints at the way that war has had (and continues to have) an adverse effect on the natural environment.

Alliteration is then an obvious feature of lines 3-4. These /s/ sounds—also known as sibilance—evoke the smoky battlefield. They dominate the line, preventing the chance for other sounds to appear (mimicking the concealing effect of the smoke):

> Smouldering through spouts of drifting smoke that shroud
> The menacing scarred slope;

The alliteration of /b/ sounds across lines 6 and 7 ("barrage," "bowed," and "bombs") has a loudness to it that suggests the noisiness of the battlefield, with bombs falling all around. Later, in line 9, there is a kind of double alliteration:

> Lines of grey, muttering faces, masked with fear

These repeated sounds create a sense of numerousness to match the anonymous mass of soldiers going "over the top."

Finally, line 11 uses alliterating /t/ sounds to suggest the sound of a ticking clock or watch: "time ticks." This is intentionally very close to the usual way of depicting a clock's sound: tick tock.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "d," "d"
- **Line 2:** "s"
- **Line 3:** "S," "s," "s"
- **Line 4:** "s," "s," "o," "o"
- **Line 5:** "T," "t," "t"
- **Line 6:** "b," "b"
- **Line 7:** "b," "b"
- **Line 8:** "M," "m," "b," "f"
- **Line 9:** "m," "f," "m," "f"
- **Line 11:** "t," "t," "b," "b"
- **Line 12:** "f," "f"
- **Line 13:** "F," "m," "m"

APOSTROPHE

Apostrophe is used just once in "Attack"—right at the end: "O Jesus, make it stop!" This, of course, is also an allusion to the Christian faith. It's the first mention of religion in the poem and, most likely deliberately, seems somewhat out of place. Up until this point, the poem has painted a picture of an almost alien landscape, an environment in which the sun is a "wild purple" and men die senselessly in great number.

Perhaps the appeal to Jesus—for some kind of savior—is sincere. That is, maybe the speaker really does hope for a divine intervention. In another sense, though, the cry to God serves only to highlight God's absence. This seems to be a world devoid of morality, logic, and order; what the poem describes is more like anarchy, hopelessness, and violent chaos. So, the

poem's use of apostrophe captures a complex reaction to the horrors of war, in which soldiers both have hope and have lost hope—in which they have nowhere left to turn but to a God they might not even believe in.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 13:** "O Jesus"

ASSONANCE

Assonance is used relatively sparingly in "Attack." One of its first uses is in line 3, in which "spouts" is assonant with "shroud." This line also employs the similar long /o/ sound in "Smouldering" and "smoke." The assonance here helps reinforce the image of a landscape dominated by wisps of smoke. This effect continues into the next line, where "slope" then picks up on the long /o/ sound. Later, in line 10, "going over" rings with a kind of muscular /o/ sound, suggestive of the physical and mental effort required of the men entering the line of "bristling fire."

Lines 11 and 12's assonance also has an important effect:

> While time ticks blank and busy on their wrists,
> And hope, with furtive eyes and grappling fists

Two different /i/ sounds, the long /i/ and short /i/, dominate the lines here. This gives them a kind of tick-tock sound, the different /i/ sounds marking the passing of a small moment in time. In war, of course, every second counts: some can lead to death, and some can feel like they last lifetimes.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "ow"
- **Line 3:** "ou," "ou," "o," "ou"
- **Line 4:** "o," "o," "o"
- **Line 6:** "u"
- **Line 7:** "u," "o"
- **Line 8:** "i," "i"
- **Line 9:** "i," "e," "a," "ea"
- **Line 10:** "ea," "o," "o"
- **Line 11:** "i," "i," "i," "u," "i"
- **Line 12:** "i," "i," "i"

CAESURA

Caesura is used throughout "Attack," functioning in different ways. The first caesura occurs in line 4, with the semicolon after "slope." Put simply, this marks the end of the poem's introductory scene-setting, which works almost like an establishing shot in a film:

> The menacing scarred slope; and, one by one,

The poem zooms in from the landscape into the machinery of war, and then, finally into the human inhabitants of the battlefield. The comma after "and" in this line keeps things from picking up too quickly, inserting a pause that builds some anticipation before readers learn *what*, exactly, is moving "one by one."

The next significant caesura appears in line 6. The full-stop after "lifts" indicates that the poem is shifting into its next stage, and finally—almost halfway through—introducing people into its world:

> The barrage roars and lifts. Then, clumsily bowed

Once again there's another comma after this midline break, further delaying the introduction of the soldiers themselves—much like line 4 delayed the introduction of the tanks. In all, these many pauses add a sense of weight to the poem; they make it feel like it's plodding along in fits and starts. The poem's lines themselves aren't particularly smooth or easy going, which reflects the nature of the content. That is, war in the poem is depicted as clumsy, weighty, and relentless, and so it makes sense that the poem's language is similarly onerous.

The period in the final line is also an important caesura. It creates an emphasis on the word "mud," linking the end of the poem back to its opening focus on the (corrupted) natural environment. It also lends the closing line an air of desperation and drama before the speaker makes his final—and unheard—plea.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** ";" ","
- **Line 6:** "." ","
- **Line 9:** "," ","
- **Line 10:** ","
- **Line 12:** ","
- **Line 13:** "." ","

CONSONANCE

Consonance is used throughout "Attack." It starts immediately, and is packed into the first two lines:

> At dawn the ridge emerges massed and dun
> In the wild purple of the glow'ring sun,

If the reader didn't know any better, they could be forgiven for thinking that the poem *might* be describing something other than a battle site: beautiful natural scenery, perhaps. These lines might read like some kind of praise to nature. The lines seem to be intentionally pretty—not to prettify war, but to work as a kind of grotesque contrast.

However, looking closer at the lines, the scene they describe is

actually quite strange. The "ridge" has a corpse-like grey color, and the sun is an unnatural "wild purple." The beauty of the sounds is thus somewhat ironic, hinting at the corruption of the natural environment brought about by the battle.

In lines 3 and 4, the poem uses numerous /s/ sounds to create a smoky atmosphere:

> Smouldering through spouts of drifting smoke that shroud
> The menacing scarred slope;

These are mostly alliteration and are covered in that part of the guide.

Later, lines 7 and 8 make effective use of /l/ and /n/ sounds:

> With bombs and guns and shovels and battle-gear,
> Men jostle and climb to, meet the bristling fire.

These sounds make the lines feel full and burdened, mirroring the way that the soldiers are "bowed" under the weight of their packs.

The two final lines make effective use of /s/ sounds:

> And hope, with furtive eyes and grappling fists,
> Flounders in mud. O Jesus, make it stop!

They have a chaotic sound to them, mimicking the "flounder[ing" motion attributed to the personified "hope."

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "d," "n," "r," "g," "m," "r," "g," "m," "d," "nd," "d," "n"
- **Line 2:** "n," "ld," "p," "r," "pl," "l," "r," "s," "n"
- **Line 3:** "S," "m," "ld," "n," "s," "s," "d," "s," "m," "s," "d"
- **Line 4:** "m," "c," "s," "s," "o," "n," "o," "n"
- **Line 5:** "T," "r," "t," "r," "r," "t," "r"
- **Line 6:** "b," "rr," "r," "rs," "s," "m," "s," "b"
- **Line 7:** "b," "m," "s," "nd," "g," "n," "s," "nd," "ls," "nd," "b," "l," "g," "r"
- **Line 8:** "M," "n," "s," "l," "nd," "l," "m," "m," "s," "l," "f," "r"
- **Line 9:** "s," "m," "f," "c," "s," "m," "s," "f," "r"
- **Line 10:** "Th," "th"
- **Line 11:** "t," "t," "ck," "s," "b," "k," "b," "s," "s"
- **Line 12:** "p," "f," "s," "pp," "l," "n," "f," "s," "s"
- **Line 13:** "Fl," "d," "s," "m," "d," "s," "s," "m," "s"

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is used three times in "Attack." It first occurs at the end of the first line, allowing for the poem's opening phrase to extend over two lines. This has a subtle effect, helping the opening feel like a kind of wide, cinematic establishing shot:

> At dawn the ridge emerges massed and dun
> In the wild purple of the glow'ring sun,

The second enjambment is at the end of line 3. This time, the line break also suspends the sense of the sentence (without the next line to complete it, it wouldn't make grammatical sense). This chimes neatly with the word "shroud"; *to shroud* something is to conceal it, and the enjambment conceals the sentence's meaning until the next line comes along. This conveys the general difficulty that the soldiers have when it comes to seeing what they are doing through the smoke of the battlefield.

The third and final enjambment, coming at the end of line 6, is perhaps the most interesting of all. This is an important point in the poem, marking the entrance of the soldiers (almost halfway into the poem's overall length). Again, the enjambment is used to suspend grammatical sense, starting with "Then, clumsily bowed." This fragment creates a deliberately awkward tension across the lines, so that these words require those that follow on the next line. This awkwardness relates to the way in which the men are "clumsily bowed," heavily weighed down by their backpacks full of military equipment.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "dun"
- **Line 2:** "In"
- **Line 3:** "shroud"
- **Line 4:** "The"
- **Line 6:** "bowed"
- **Line 7:** "With"

PERSONIFICATION

Personification is used in two key moments in "Attack." The first occurs in the poem's opening lines, which in general function like an establishing shot in a film. These lines focus on the environment of war, and the effects of warfare on the natural world. At this point, the "slope" is described as "menacing" and "scarred." While the second adjective doesn't necessarily rely on personification, it does carry with it the sense that the land is injured (like a soldier might be).

"Menacing," though, is straight-up personification. It assigns a kind of evil and aggressive intent to the landscape which, of course, is not literally true. Rather, this personification relates to the way that the natural environment is an active part of battle: both sides try to use it to their advantage. Most likely, the enemy are using the slope as a way of taking cover, meaning that the slope itself conceals hidden danger and potential death.

The other key example of personification is in the poem's two closing lines. Here, the poem takes an abstract concept—"hope"—and turns it into a kind of deranged figure. Hope is said to be "flounder[ing]" in the mud, fighting with

"grappling fists." Hope itself, then, is fighting for its life—and it's an overwhelmingly chaotic fight, like the one faced by the real soldiers. Hope also has "furtive eyes" (i.e. sneaky eyes) which relates to the way that hope—like a soldier—is trying to remain undiscovered by the enemy. But "furtive" also carries connotations of guilt, suggesting the way that hope has let these soldiers down.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "menacing scarred slope"
- **Lines 12-13:** "And hope, with furtive eyes and grappling fists, / Flounders in mud."

POLYSYNDETON

Polysyndeton occurs in one line of "Attack." Up until line 7, the poem's grammar behaves pretty much as expected in terms of its use of commas and the conjunction "and." But in line 7, a series of nouns—all relating to equipment carried by the soldiers—are separated by a corresponding group of "and[s]":

> With bombs **and** guns **and** shovels **and** battle-gear,

This is an important point in the poem, essentially marking the introduction of the soldiers into the poem's world (the previous lines focused on the landscape and on tanks respectively). In line 6 the men are described as being "clumsily bowed," and line 7 then lists some of the stuff that these soldiers have to carry—that is, it basically explains *why* the men are "clumsily bowed." The repeated use of "and" in this list makes it seem endless and conjures a sense of the equipment's heaviness; all the tools of war just keep piling up. The polysyndeton also helps this sentence delay its main grammatical subject (that is, the "Men" themselves, who aren't actually mentioned until line 8), making the heavy equipment actually arrive in the poem before the soldiers do. This emphasizes how much of a burden it is to carry all of these tools of war.

Where Polysyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "and," "and," "and"

VOCABULARY

The Ridge (Line 1) - This is the top of the trenches, over which the soldiers have to go to engage the enemy.

Massed (Line 1) - This means densely packed, relating to the way the earth has been altered by the digging of the trenches.

Dun (Line 1) - This is a greyish-brown color.

Glow'ring (Line 2) - This an abbreviation of *glowering*, which means to have an angry look. The abbreviation shortens the word from three syllables (glowering) to two (glow'ring).

Smouldering (Line 3) - Something that is burning gently with smoke but no flame (like a hot coal).

Spouts (Line 3) - A *spout* in this instance is a stream of smoke.

Shroud (Line 3) - *To shroud* something is to cover it, especially with some kind of material.

The Wire (Line 5) - This is barbed wire spread on the battlefield to make it hard for the enemy to progress.

Barrage (Line 6) - This is artillery fire from large guns.

Jostle (Line 8) - *To jostle* is to physically compete for space.

Bristling (Line 8) - This can mean covered in hair, but also carries connotations of anger.

Furtive (Line 12) - A *furtive* look is one that is nervous and perhaps guilty.

Grappling (Line 12) - *Grappling* is like wrestling, a kind of frantic close combat.

Flounder (Line 13) - *To flounder* is to struggle clumsily.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

At first glance, "Attack" looks like a sonnet. Indeed, a number of the famous First World War poems *are* sonnets (Wilfred Owen's "Anthem for Doomed Youth," for example). This poem has a similar look on the page. Like a sonnet, it's rhymed and written in iambic pentameter.

On closer look, however, the poem consists of *13* lines—rather than the *14* that usually make a sonnet. The poem, then, *doesn't* line up neatly with the sonnet form. Perhaps this is a deliberate attempt by Sassoon to wrong-foot the reader: to say, these are the real horrors of war, and in this instance they do not fit into a neat poetic form.

Overall, the poem follows a kind of zooming-in trajectory. The first four lines are like an establishing shot in a film. Then, tanks and artillery appear, followed by the hapless men hampered by their equipment. Finally, they have to go over the top and into the line of fire. The poem pleads aimlessly with Jesus at the end, clarifying the pure sentiment behind the poem: "make it stop."

METER

By and large, "Attack" is a poem written in iambic pentameter. These are lines of five stresses, with each stress consisting of an unstressed-stressed pattern (da DUM). The first line is a good example of this steady-sounding meter:

> At **dawn** | the **ridge** | emer- | ges **massed** | and **dun**

But just as it fails to conform to the sonnet structure—with 13,

rather than 14 lines—the poem also disrupts the regularity of the iambic pentameter. This is a way of making the meter evoke the chaos and unpredictability of warfare.

The meter is disrupted as early as the second line:

In the wi- | ld pur- | ple of | the glow- | 'ring sun

The extra unstressed syllable in the first foot makes the first three syllables collectively into an an anapest (da da DUM). This syllable suggests something is not quite right, supporting the opening descriptions of an almost alien world.

Note that "wild" could also be read as a single syllable, so that the line would read:

In the | wild pur- | ple of | the glow- | ring sun

Either way, these first few syllables create an awkward, heavy feeling. The word "of," too, receives a stress because of the iambic pentameter pattern, but feels deliberately awkward, anticipating the image of the pack-laden men later in the poem

The last line also makes a key variation, swapping an iamb for a trochee (DUM da) in its first foot:

Flounders | in mud. | O Je- | sus, make | it stop!

This early stress gives the verb "flounders" an extra sense of urgency and drama, conveying the way that the personified "hope" is struggling (metaphorically) in the mud.

RHYME SCHEME

Even as early as the first two lines, the reader can tell that this is a rhymed poem. Indeed, on first look the poem *appears* to be a sonnet, with the rhyme falling into a sonnet-style pattern. But all is not as it seems—the poem has 13 lines, not the usual 14 of a sonnet. This is an overall strategy to suggest that something is wrong in the poem's world: things are not as they seem.

The rhyme scheme, then, is as follows:

AABACBDCDEFFE

Put simply, this isn't really a scheme at all—the poem seems to make it up as it goes along. In other words, the poem plays with the tension between reality and appearances. This was an important idea for Sassoon more generally, who felt that some war poets were guilty of mythologizing and poeticizing war in a way that failed to convey the realities of what it was actually like. The presence of rhyme coupled with the denial of a regular scheme suggests that war may seem structured (in terms of strategy, goals of gaining territory, etc.) but that for soldiers on the ground it's utterly chaotic.

SPEAKER

The speaker in "Attack" is unspecified, but is clearly a witness to the battle that the poem describes. Usually, this poem (and others from the same collection) are interpreted as being based on Sassoon's own experience at war. Sassoon survived the war, after having served in it extensively.

But Sassoon deliberately avoids direct mention of himself. This makes the poem seem more universal and, in a grotesque kind of way, more commonplace. In other words, these could be the observations of one soldier among many, on any given day during the First World War. For the most part, the speaker maintains a detached tone. But the final line makes the desperation of the conflict stark and clear, bringing in the speaker's simple and personal plea to Jesus: "make it stop!"

SETTING

The poem's setting is the First World War. It doesn't, however, make reference to any specific *battle* during the war, meaning that this is more an account of the *kind* of battle that was commonplace. Indeed, these kinds of scenes would have been the reality for hundreds of thousands of men. Trench warfare took place on the European continent, with a great number of casualties exchanged for often small gains in territory.

The poem develops its sense of setting in an interesting way. Most of the first four lines are taken up with description of the environment in which the battle takes place, sounding almost—but not quite—picturesque. The vantage point then zooms in through the "purple" sunlight and "drifting smoke" to focus on the tanks. Then, in the poem's main section, the focus turns to the men themselves as they go "over the top" to meet death, injury, or a lucky escape.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Siegfried Sassoon is one of the most celebrated poets of the First World War. Born in 1886 to a fairly wealthy family, Sassoon later studied at Cambridge University, before leaving without his degree. In the years between leaving university and the start of the war, Sassoon lived a comfortable existence of writing and sport (especially cricket), supported by private family income. His first success in publishing was the 1913 parody *The Daffodil Murder*.

Sassoon served extensively during WWI. During a period of convalescence he met fellow poet Robert Graves. Both agreed that poetry ought to convey the "gritty realism" of war, as opposed to the overly romanticized and mythologized work of someone like Rupert Brooke (or, indeed, some of Sassoon's

early work). This meeting had a strong effect on Sassoon, and shows up in the bleakness of this poem. In his other work of the time, the desire to show the realities of war meant that Sassoon made space in his poems for cowardice, suicide, the decomposition of corpses, and horrific injuries (among other challenging subjects).

In another period of recovery, Sassoon was to have a similar influence over the younger Wilfred Owen that Graves had had over him. Again, both men advocated an unflinching and realistic way of writing about the horrors of war. This perspective contrasts with the kind of nationalistic propaganda that the government used to make young men sign up to fight *and* to keep the public in favor of the war. Such was Sassoon's impact on Owen that a couple of key phrases from Owen's "Anthem for Doomed Youth" were actually Sassoon's ideas.

It's also important to note that Sassoon was not *just* a war poet. Despite being one of the most daring and cavalier soldiers in the army—earning him the nickname Mad Jack—Sassoon somehow survived the war. He published poetry and novels after the war, and worked as an editor. He died in 1967.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

At the time, World War I was described with the term "the war to end all wars"—a phrase that of course turned out to be tragically inaccurate with the onset of World War II. Around 16 million people died directly in WWI, with many more perishing in the great flu outbreaks and genocides (for example, the Armenian Genocide) that followed.

The war began with the assassination of Archduke Franz-Ferdinand, who was the heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire (which ruled a large section of Central and Eastern Europe at the time). The assassin, Gavrilo Princip, wished to see an end to Austro-Hungarian rule in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Previously arranged allegiances soon brought Germany and Russia into opposition, and before too long this conflict pulled the other countries of Europe into the war as well. In 1915, the Germans sank a British passenger ship called the Lusitania, killing many civilians. Among other reasons, this event drew the United States into the conflict as well.

As described in the poem, WWI was a horrendously destructive war. Life in the trenches of Europe was terrifying and deadly, and the poor conditions caused frequent sickness and disease. Sassoon, however, is reputed to have been an incredibly brave soldier. His near-suicidal willingness to enter the line of fire earned him the nickname "Mad Jack," and his aptitude for war meant he was later awarded the Military Cross (one of the military's highest honors). Such facts should not cloud the fact that Sassoon came to be highly critical of the war, and of such conflict more generally. In his own words, he believed that: "Let no one ever, from henceforth say one word in any way countenancing war [...] for its spiritual disasters far outweigh any of its advantages."

It's also important to note that Sassoon had a number of sexual relationships with other men long before it was made legal in the United Kingdom. He did, however, marry his wife Hester Gatty in 1933, with whom he had a child.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Reading of the Poem — Sassoon's poem read brilliantly by actor Gemma Arteton. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r6D3OUJk3rs)
- Sassoon's Correspondence — A letter from Sassoon to his uncle, shortly after Sassoon was wounded in battle. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/siegfried-sassoon-letters-to-his-uncle)
- Sassoon's Life and Work — A BBC Radio documentary about Siegfried Sassoon and his poetry. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ge2Y0oN-ee8)
- Another Reading, This Time by Helen Mirren! — This excellent reading is by actor Dame Helen Mirren. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uv8XMiwjH-4)
- Bringing WWI to Life — In this clip, director Peter Jackson discusses his recent WWI film, They Shall Not Grow Old. Though technology, Jackson brings old war footage to vivid life, restoring a sense of the soldiers as actual people. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZY7RQAX_03c)
- More Poems From WWI — A valuable resource from the Poetry Foundation focusing on First World War poetry. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/70139/the-poetry-of-world-war-i)

HOW TO CITE

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