

Futility



POEM TEXT

- 1 Move him into the sun—
- 2 Gently its touch awoke him once,
- 3 At home, whispering of fields half-sown.
- 4 Always it woke him, even in France,
- 5 Until this morning and this snow.
- 6 If anything might rouse him now
- 7 The kind old sun will know.

- 8 Think how it wakes the seeds—
- 9 Woke once the clays of a cold star.
- 10 Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides
- 11 Full-nerved, still warm, too hard to stir?
- 12 Was it for this the clay grew tall?
- 13 —O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
- 14 To break earth's sleep at all?

The poem's confident descriptions of the sun's power to nourish life in the first stanza contrast with the way it doubts life's purpose in the second stanza. The speaker's first response to seeing the dead soldier is to "Move him into the sun," because the sun "always" woke him throughout his life. Even though the soldier is dead, the speaker seems confident that "the kind old sun will know" a way to revive him. Yet while the sun may be powerful enough to "wake" seeds and "warm" even the surface of a distant star, it cannot resurrect the fallen soldier.

The speaker is perplexed at how something as precious and beautiful as life can always lose out to death, and puts forth a rhetorical question as a way of underlining his or her shock: "Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides / Full-nerved, still warm, too hard to stir?" The dead body, albeit surrounded by warm sunlight, will never come back to life. The speaker then asks "Was it for this the clay grew tall?" ("clay" being a reference to the earth that human beings originally came from—an idea common in creation myths throughout the world, including the Bible), expressing incredulity that life would bother existing given that it would always lose to death.

The speaker woefully wonders in the poem's final two lines why the "fatuous," or pointless, "sunbeams" would help create life on earth in the first place, when that life would eventually die. The speaker's perspective thus widens beyond the dead soldier to include all of life. Rather than only being an elegy to a specific person (whom the poem does not even bother to name), the poem is also dedicated to mourning death's power over life—an idea magnified by the context of war.

Although it contains tinges of hope, the poem's tone ultimately comes across as mournful, doubtful, and discouraging. When situated in historical context, these tonal qualities make sense. Wilfred Owen was a British soldier during World War I, and was therefore surrounded by death. Regardless of however many sunny days occurred during the war, death likely dominated his mind, a perspective that manifests in "Futility."



SUMMARY

Move the dead soldier into the sun. Its warm touch used to wake him in the morning, reminding him of fields he had to finish filling with seeds. It always woke him up, even on the battlefields of France, until this snowy morning. If anything can wake him now, the kind old sun will know about it.

Think of how the sun lets seeds grow as if waking them up, and how it allowed human life to spring from the Earth, which was once a barren, cold planet. Are dead bodies—still precious, full of nerves, and warm—too hard to move anymore? Did life emerge from Earth just so it could die? Why would useless sunlight have bothered to wake the Earth at all?



THEMES



LIFE AND DEATH

Owen's "Futility" eulogizes an unnamed soldier lying dead in the snow in France. The speaker begins with a hopeful tone, wanting the sun to "rouse" the dead body, but shifts to one of confusion and disillusionment upon recognizing that death will always conquer life. Through this shift in tone, the poem uses the dead soldier as a catalyst for a larger, deeper mourning: that of the "futility" of the act of creation in the face of death's inevitability.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

*Move him into the sun—
Gently its touch awoke him once,
At home, whispering of fields half-sown.*

The "him" refers to a dead soldier whom the speaker and the speaker's comrades gather around in the snow. They want to keep the body warm and sunlit to preserve its dignity. Keeping the dead body warm might seem pointless, but it reminds the soldiers of the sun's positive effect on him throughout his life, which the speaker briefly recalls.

From the lines "Gently its touch awoke him once, / at home, whispering of fields half-sown," readers can gather that the fallen soldier may have been a farmer who awoke each morning by the sun's light, which reminded him to finish planting seeds in nearby fields. This recollection of the soldier's past humanizes him, informing readers of a time when he didn't have to be a soldier and risk his life each day.

Notice, too, that the sun has a "touch" as well as "whispers." These two features [personify](#) the sun, as well as convey gentle [imagery](#), making it seem almost human in the way it interacted with the soldier when he was alive. Even though the speaker, having seen many other soldiers fall in combat, knows that the soldier will never wake up, the act of moving him into the sun seems the closest thing to an attempt at revival, even if it is ultimately futile. If the sun woke the soldier each day throughout his life, "gently" touching him and "whispering," why might it not do the same now?

The poem also rearranges stress to capture these features. The poem begins with an instruction, and its first line fittingly uses two [trochees](#):

Move him | into | the sun—

These [stressed](#) syllables force the reader to pay close attention, as if the reader were the one being instructed to move the dead soldier. At the same time, this line's third [foot](#) indicates that the poem will probably follow an [iambic meter](#). And it does: each stanza begins and ends with an iambic [trimeter](#), while the intervening lines are all in iambic [tetrameter](#).

Line 2 then also begins with a trochee ("Gently"), as if the sun is softly pressing down on the meter. Similarly, line 3's second foot is a trochee or [dactyl](#), depending on how it's read:

At home, | whispering | of fields | half-sown.

"[W]hispering" can be read as having two syllables or three. Either way, its initial stress captures the excitement in the image of the sun whispering to a person.

These first three lines also reveal a larger occurrence throughout the poem, which is that of [pararhyme](#). The words "sun" and "half-sown" share an ending consonant, while their [stressed](#) vowel sounds are different. This trend occurs throughout the remainder of the poem (and was commonly used by Owen). It conveys a kind of out-of-tune, partially

haphazard sound that mimics the dissonance of the battlefield. If every line contained [perfect rhyme](#), the poem would perhaps be too harmonious for its content.

LINES 4-7

*Always it woke him, even in France,
Until this morning and this snow.
If anything might rouse him now
The kind old sun will know.*

These lines further highlight the sun's power and effectiveness at facilitating life. The speaker explains that the sun "always" woke him, "even in France" (where the soldiers are currently fighting), showing that the sun was just as effective away from the dead soldier's home as it was while he was home. The line, "Until this morning and this snow," is the stopping point to the sun's power, however, as it is now unable to "rouse" the soldier. Interestingly, the speaker doesn't share the immediate cause of the soldier's death—that is, what war-related injury afflicted the soldier. Instead, the simple images of the "morning" and "snow" mark the end of the soldier's life, and the poem maintains a relatively calm and respectful tone without relaying graphic [imagery](#).

While line 5 marks the threshold after which the sun is powerless to help the dead soldier, the speaker still maintains some hope. On one hand, the speaker knows that the soldier cannot come back from death. Even so, the speaker defers to the "kind old sun," who may know something the speaker does not about bringing back the dead. The soldier may be dead, but this first stanza ends with a hopeful tone, asserting (despite the speaker's better judgment) that the sun is perhaps powerful enough to bring the soldier back to life. The [enjambment](#) between lines 6 and 7 creates a feeling of suspense, capturing this hopeful uncertainty.

The poem's use of [perfect rhyme](#) also helps convey this hopefulness. In the rhyme between "snow" and "know," the poem suggests a sense of completeness. The sun seems to resolve the dissonance that the poem's previous [pararhymes](#) (such as between "once" and "France" in lines 2 and 4) had evoked. Furthermore, this ending rhyme picks up on the /o/ sound that has been used throughout the stanza as [assonance](#). Words like "home," "sown," and "woke" also share this sound, creating a lilting sonic quality that emphasizes the pleasantness of the soldier's former life on the farm.

A similar effect occurs metrically. Line 4 follows an irregular meter:

Always | it woke | him e- | ven in France

Here, the beginning [trochee](#) and ending [anapest](#) disrupt the iambic meter, suggesting the powerful nostalgia of this line. Lines 5 to 7, however, return to a perfect iambic meter, as if smoothing out the speaker's difficulties. Their regular iambs

convey how the speaker looks to the sun for hope.

LINES 8-9

*Think how it wakes the seeds—
Woke once the clays of a cold star.*

In these lines, the speaker continues to embellish the sun's power to give life. The speaker asks the reader to imagine how the sun "wakes the seeds," referring to its potential to provide plants with the energy they need to grow. This phrase [personifies](#) seeds as being capable of waking up, and additionally uses waking a [metaphor](#) for coming to life.

In a mythological [allusion](#), the speaker also recalls how the sun "woke once the clays of a cold star." Intriguingly, the idea that human beings originally came from clay is shared by a host of mythologies around the world, including those belonging to Ancient Egypt, Babylon, the Inca, and later, Christianity (in the creation story of the book of Genesis)—as well as many others. The poem thus references a global mythic tradition of human beings being born or molded from clay, suggesting a power of creativity that is massive in scope.

Following these mythologies, the poem treats the sun as responsible for warming that clay and thus creating life. The phrase "cold star" may seem odd at first, since stars (as far as we know) are unable to support life and don't contain clay. Here, the poem metaphorically compares the earliest days of Earth to a lightless star that is "cold" for not having yet come into contact with sunlight. These lines also resonate with the end of the first stanza: if the sun were responsible for giving humans life at the dawn of creation, then surely it is powerful enough to help them rise again in spite of death.

The poem's [meter](#) conveys the passion within this futile hope:

Woke once | the clays | of a | cold star.

Here, [spondees](#) bookend the line. The double-stressed syllables seem charged with sun's power to create. Meanwhile, the line's third, [pyrrhic](#) foot of unstressed syllables swoops in to this charged ending, speeding up the line to dramatic effect.

LINES 10-12

*Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides
Full-nerved, still warm, too hard to stir?
Was it for this the clay grew tall?*

While the previous line seemed charged with energy, now the poem slows down in disappointment. The set of [rhetorical questions](#) in these lines shifts the speaker's previously calm and hopeful tone to one of confusion and discouragement.

Soon after reflecting on the sun's ability to help life emerge from clay, the speaker asks, "Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides / Full-nerved, still warm, too hard to stir?" The speaker struggles to understand how the human body, given life and

warmth by the sun, could become unable to move again. The uneven meter of line 11 further emphasizes that struggle:

Full-nerved, | still warm, | too hard | to stir?

Combined with [caesuras](#) created by the commas, these lines depict the speaker stumbling through doubt. Given their rhetorical nature, these questions represent [aporia](#) on the part of the speaker. The speaker asks these questions not in expectation of learning an answer, but to highlight his or her astonishment at the futility of the human body.

The phrase "dear-achieved" shows just much work went into making human beings from clay, and the speaker's following question ("Was it for this the clay grew tall?") suggests that the speaker believes all of that work went to waste in the face of death. The poem's [pararhyme](#) reflects the speaker's growing cynicism as well. The word "star," full of the Earth's future beauty, becomes "stir," referring to a dead body's inability to move. Hope has become disappointment.

This shift in tone from the slightly more hopeful and nostalgic first [stanza](#) might seem sudden, but the poem is entrenched in the context of war, where death is omnipresent. It makes sense, then, that the speaker eventually comes to focus on death and the futility of life. After years spent witnessing the deaths of young, promising people in battle—including many friends—the speaker finds it difficult not to believe that life is a waste.

LINES 13-14

*—O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earth's sleep at all?*

The speaker's final moment of [aporia](#) conveys the opposite sentiment as the poem's beginning. The word "fatuous" to describe "sunbeams" seems surprising when coming from the mouth of one who proclaimed that "the kind old sun" might be powerful enough to reverse death. But here, after reflecting on the supposed "futility" of life and soaking in the reality of his or her comrade's death, the speaker shifts perspective on the sun from one of respect to one of cynicism.

For the speaker, the sunbeams are indeed "fatuous," or useless, for they helped raise humans from clay just to let them die. The speaker even suggests that the earth may have been better off "asleep," or in whatever state it occupied before life existed. If life leads only to death, thinks the speaker, then the sun's effort in helping life flourish seems like a wasteful mistake.

Finally, by reemphasizing the [personification](#) of the sun—describing sunbeams as capable of "toiling," or working hard—the speaker intensifies the degree to which life is wasted. For the speaker, the sun did not just happen to shine on the earth, but instead exerted a magnificent effort that required "toiling" to create life. In the end, the poem struggles to understand life's purpose when it seems to lead only to death.

The poem's final rhymes convey a dissonant finality. Like the first [stanza](#), the poem ends on a [perfect rhyme](#) ("tall" and "all"). However, also like the first stanza, it also contains a [pararhyme](#) ("toil" and "all"), in which only the final consonants are the same. This effect creates a decisive ending that, paradoxically, doesn't quite seem to resolve. It reflects the fact that the poem ends on a question: why does life exist, if it must inevitably die? On one hand, it's impossible to answer this question. On the other hand, the poem's ending sentiment is clear: life is futile.



SYMBOLS



THE SUN

The sun represents life in the poem: it has the power to create and sustain living things through its warm light. The poem [metaphorically](#) associates this power with the act of waking up. After all, light literally has the ability to wake up sleeping humans.

As a symbol, the sun is intertwined with the Earth. First, the poem associates the sun with farming and plant growth. The sun's early morning light reminds farmers to get back to their "half-sown," or half-planted, fields. Metaphorically, its light "wakes the seeds," which use photosynthesis to grow. Taking this thinking one step further, the speaker [alludes](#) to various creation myths in which living things were first created out of "clay," or dirt, that had been exposed to sunlight. In this line of thought, the sun is directly responsible for life on Earth, transforming the planet from a "cold star" to a fertile world.

In Western culture, the sun is also often associated with God or a god, such as Apollo. Yet "Futility" depicts the limits of its divine power. For instance, the poem [personifies](#) the sun to emphasize both ways the sun cared for the dead soldier as well as the shortcomings of that care. Earlier in the soldier's life, the "kind old sun" shone on the soldier to "[g]ently" wake him. Now, that gentleness isn't enough—the sun can't bring the soldier back from death. The sun's "toil" to bring the earth to life has been "fatuous," or useless, because all living things die.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "the," "sun"
- **Line 2:** "Gently its touch awoke him once"
- **Line 7:** "kind old sun"
- **Line 8:** "Think how it wakes the seeds"
- **Lines 13-14:** "—O what made fatuous sunbeams toil / To break earth's sleep at all?"



POETIC DEVICES

APORIA

The speaker's [aporia](#) manifests in the series of [rhetorical questions](#) he or she asks in the second stanza, each wondering about life's purpose. The intensity with which the speaker asks these questions shows how much he or she cared about this fallen soldier.

Immediately after a description of the sun's power to wake both "seeds" and "clay," the speaker asks "Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides / Full-nerved, still warm, too hard to stir?" In other words, can life really stop so suddenly after all the work that went into it? The speaker already knows the answer to this question (the answer is yes), but asks it anyway to highlight the extent of the speaker's disbelief.

The speaker's next question, "Was it for this the clay grew tall?" is a similarly rhetorical question suggesting that life's work went to waste, and that the clay "grew tall" for no apparent reason. Here, "clay" refers to mythological stories in which humans were created from lifeless lumps of clay. The speaker is wondering what the point of creating people was, if they were only going to die.

The last rhetorical question is perhaps the most powerful, for it calls into question why life would even bother existing. The speaker wonders if earth may have been better off "asleep," for it seems unnecessary and cruel that sunbeams would have "toiled" for so long just to let their creations die. Rather than providing a gentle "touch" as they did in the first stanza, the sunbeams here are "fatuous," for they only seem to lead to death. Throughout each of these questions, the reader gains a sense for how much the speaker cared for the soldier that died. If the speaker hadn't shared a strong bond with him, the speaker likely wouldn't have been as motivated to question life's purpose so intensely.

Where Aporia appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-14:** "Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides / Full-nerved, still warm, too hard to stir? / Was it for this the clay grew tall? / —O what made fatuous sunbeams toil / To break earth's sleep at all?"

ASSONANCE

The poem contains several examples of [assonance](#). For instance, in the first stanza, "awoke" shares the long /o/ sound with "home," "half-sown," "woke," "snow," "old," and "know." The repetition of this /o/ sound gives the first stanza a lilting and reassuring sonic quality, which falls in line with its content. The sun "gently" touches the dead soldier and "whispers" to him, both of which are calm actions. And even though the soldier is dead, the speaker suggests that the "kind old sun" will "know" a

way to bring the soldier back to life, reassuring the reader that there's still reason to hope.

In the second stanza, each group of words with shared internal vowel sounds is more spread out than in the first stanza—meaning that these words aren't truly assonant, a fact that is evocative in and of itself. The long /e/ of "seeds" echoes later in "dear-achieved" and "sleep," while "wakes," "clay" and "break" share a long /a/ sound. Unlike the first stanza, however, these shared sounds do not resonate all that clearly because the words that contain them have more space in between one another.

This tendency seems tied to the stanza's content, which contrasts heavily with the first stanza's. The speaker moves from complimenting the sun's power in the first stanza to describing it as "fatuous" in the face of death in the second stanza. This receding assonance reflects the speaker's waning hope that life has a purpose, which eventually moves into full-blown doubt.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "i," "i," "u"
- **Line 2:** "i," "ou," "o," "i," "o"
- **Line 3:** "A," "o," "i," "a," "o"
- **Line 4:** "i," "o," "i," "i"
- **Line 5:** "i," "i," "o"
- **Line 6:** "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 7:** "o," "i," "o"
- **Line 9:** "o," "o," "a"
- **Line 10:** "A," "ea," "ie"
- **Line 11:** "oo," "o"
- **Line 12:** "i," "i"

CAESURA

The first instances of [caesura](#) in "Futility" occur in the first stanza, in lines 3 and 4. Here, the caesurae depict moments when the speaker's train of thought gets interrupted in order to include more information. These instances let the reader know that speaker is working out his or her thoughts as the poem goes along, adding or modifying information as it seems necessary.

The most prominent examples of caesura occur in the second stanza, when the speaker asks a set of [rhetorical questions](#) aimed at life's purpose. The speaker asks, "Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides / Full-nerved, still warm, too hard to stir?" There are four total pauses in this question, each created by a comma, which cause the question to stand out.

These pauses represent the speaker's increasing uncertainty. In the first stanza, the speaker seems confident in the sun's power to create life, as well as in its ability to potentially revive the dead. However, in the second stanza, that hope gets replaced with doubt in life's purpose. When the speaker asks the above

question, he or she expresses anger or incredulity at the impossibility of bringing the dead back to life. These caesurae capture that feeling. It's almost as if the speaker stutters, having trouble even getting the point across. The speaker may seem confident that life is futile by the end of the poem, but this instance of caesura captures the difficulty with which such confidence is won. It depicts the speaker thinking and feeling in real time.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** ^() ,
- **Line 4:** ^() ,
- **Line 10:** " " ^() ,
- **Line 11:** " " ^() ,

IMAGERY

The [imagery](#) in "Futility" largely concerns sunlight and the effect sunlight has on life. The very first image in the poem is an instruction to move the dead soldier into the sunlight, as though it might help him even amidst death. The first stanza also makes the sun out to be a calming, all-knowing figure, thus overlapping with the poem's use of [personification](#).

The sun's touch is "gentle," "kind," and "old." The reader might not be able to explicitly envision a "kind" and "old" sun, but the words do help the reader visualize the sunlight as peaceful, yet powerful. The second stanza's images initially continue this trend, describing the sun's ability to "wake" seeds by bringing them to life and to help human beings emerge from "clay." Furthermore, by connecting images of the sun to images of the Earth—such as "fields," "seeds," and "clay"—the poem encourages the reader to see this soldier's death against the background of a broader landscape.

The second half of the poem contrasts with the more positive descriptions above. One of the poem's final images is of "fatuous sunbeams" in the act of "toiling." This image asks the reader to imagine sunlight as useless. This in turn relates to the poem's image of the early earth as a "cold star," and its later image of "earth's sleep." In these instances, the speaker imagines what the Earth looked like before there was any sunlight or life on it, when it was nothing more than a barren rock. This implied image contrasts with the images of fields and seeds from earlier in the poem.

All these images serve as a background for the poem's main subject, the fallen soldier. The speaker, however, refuses to depict this soldier in detail. The only images the speaker provides are, "limbs [...] / Full-nerved, still warm, too hard to stir." These images draw attention to the physical reality of the fallen soldier's body, emphasizing his immobility as life ebbs away. Yet in avoiding any further details about the soldier's face or his wounds, the speaker preserves a measure of dignity and anonymity for the soldier.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-3
- Line 5
- Line 7
- Lines 8-9
- Line 10
- Line 11
- Lines 13-14

JUXTAPOSITION

"Futility" [juxtaposes](#) two large and abstract concepts: life and death. The occasion of the poem is the death of a World War I soldier, who lies helplessly in the snow in France. However, the poem immediately introduces the "sun" as a key figure, which is commonly associated with life. In the first stanza, even though the death of the soldier seems certain, the line between life and death is blurred. The speaker says "If anything might rouse him now / The kind old sun will know," suggesting that the sun, as a life-giving force, may know a way to awaken the soldier from the slumber of death. Perhaps death is not, in fact, absolute.

In the second stanza, death makes the speaker question whether or not life has a purpose. When the speaker asks "Was it for this the clay grew tall?" the speaker suggests that life may be futile, given that all living things eventually succumb to death. Furthermore, if life is futile, wonders the speaker, then why would it bother gracing earth's presence ("breaking earth's sleep") at all? The speaker wonders if the world would have been just as well off without life, suggesting that life is really just another path to death, rather than something separate. In this line of thought, the traditionally opposed forces of life and death become less opposed and more connected.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

PERSONIFICATION

"Futility" [personifies](#) the sun to emphasize its potential to empower life. Describing the sun in human characteristics allows readers to relate more closely to the positive effect the sun has on the soldier. In the first stanza, it "touches" the dead soldier and "whispers" as a way of waking him up. These descriptions are more effective than saying that the sun "shines," for example, since "touch" conveys a more intimate sensory experience than the act of shining. The sun is even described as having a personality, being "kind" and "old," associating it with both positivity and authority.

The speaker continues to personify the sun in the second stanza, describing how it "wakes the seeds" and "the clays of a cold star." In these intensely personified and [metaphorical](#) lines, the "cold star" represents the Earth before there was any life

on it. The "seeds" and the "clays" are each personified, their acts of coming alive compared to humans waking up from sleep. Here, "clays" [alludes](#) to myths in which the original humans were created out of lifeless lumps of clay. Again, these personifications highlight the sun's act of giving life. Now, however, the sun's beams "toil," emphasizing the difficulty of making things come alive.

In general, these moments of personification depict a world brimming with life and death—not just for humans, but for all things. Human readers don't know what it's like to be a plant growing from seed, nor what it's like to take shape from clay, so the poem draws readers into these experience using human descriptions. The poem even describes the earth as "asleep" in the poem's final line, further underlining the sun's power to cause humans, plants, and even planets, to awaken with life. All things come to life, and all things die.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-4
- Line 6
- Line 7
- Lines 8-9
- Line 12
- Line 13
- Line 14

ENJAMBMENT

Although most lines in "Futility" are [end-stopped](#), several are [enjambéd](#) and carry distinct meaning via their breaks. The first moment of enjambment occurs between lines 6 and 7: "If anything might rouse him now / The kind old sun will know." The drop-off after "now" creates a pause that adds weight to the question of whether something could indeed revive the dead soldier. It then slips into a reassuring tone by immediately following that question with the statement "The kind old sun will know."

The enjambment between lines 10 and 11 has a different effect. Here, the speaker takes time to describe the complexity of the soldier's physical characteristics, including sides that are "full-nerved" and limbs that are "dear-achieved," or attained via hard work on the part of creation. By employing enjambment, the speaker further emphasizes how much time the poem devotes to describing these qualities. Through this lengthy, halting description, the speaker conveys how death comes to dominate every detail of the body.

The final moment of enjambment occurs between the final two lines. The break after "toil" adds weight to the question of "what made fatuous sunbeams toil." The momentary silence that follows this line break suggests that there may have been *no reason* for sunbeams to awaken the earth. Additionally, the final line of the poem even mentions an explicit "break" in

reference to the earth's "break" in sleep. Thus, the poem's enjambed *line break* underlines this [metaphorical](#) "break" in the earth's slumber. All in all, the poem suggests that this act of waking is futile; it's merely an act of "toil," given that all life on earth will eventually die.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-7:** "now / The"
- **Lines 10-11:** "sides / Full-nerved"
- **Lines 13-14:** "toil / To"

METAPHOR

"Futility" uses several [metaphors](#) to contemplate creation and the place of life on earth. In the poem's beginning, the speaker remains relatively focused on the dead soldier's circumstances, describing the way the sun "awoke him" each morning (comparing sunlight to "touch" and "whisper[s]"). But as the poem progress, the soldier's death inspires the speaker to contemplate life as a whole, thinking back to the purpose of creation.

In the second stanza, the speaker compares the sprouting of seeds to the act of waking up. Going even further, the speaker then goes on to reference how the lifeless earth first "woke"—that is, first produced life. Here, the speaker compares earth to a "cold star." Although the earth was never really a star (since stars are not the same as planets), the poem seems to refer to a time when the Earth was cold and lifeless, before the sun shone on it. The choice to use the phrase "cold star" and not "Earth" suggests that "Earth" was never really the "Earth" until it became warm enough to produce life. "Cold star," being an unfamiliar phrase, helps clarify that the poem is talking about a time so long ago that the Earth itself would have looked unfamiliar.

In the poem's final lines, the suggestion that "earth's sleep" was broken by "sunbeams" represents a moment of creation. The metaphor of earth being "asleep" (i.e. not having any life) falls in line with the speaker's frequent descriptions of "waking" as the act of coming alive. This metaphor demonstrates the extent to which the speaker's thoughts have broadened from the body of the dead soldier to include creation at large.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Gently its touch awoke him once,"
- **Line 3:** "At home, whispering of fields half-sown."
- **Line 4:** "Always it woke him"
- **Line 8:** "Think how it wakes the seeds—"
- **Line 9:** "Woke once the clays of a cold star."
- **Lines 13-14:** "—O what made fatuous sunbeams toil / To break earth's sleep at all?"

ALLUSION

The poem's references to "clay" are [allusions](#) to a story in creation myths around the world that human beings originally came from clay. The mythologies of Ancient Egypt, Babylon, the Inca, Ancient Greece, China, Hinduism, Christianity, and many others all reference the idea that humans were formed from earth. This allusion, which repeats explicitly in lines 9 and 12, helps the speaker describe the moment of creation, when sunlight first "woke" seeds and "woke once the clays of a cold star" (i.e. brought Earth to life).

The speaker describes creation because he is in fact calling the act of creation into question. For the speaker, creation seems like a futile act in the face of death. The speaker's [rhetorical question](#), "Was it for this the clay grew tall?" is another way of asking "Did humans originally come from clay just to be subjected to death?" The idea that death extinguishes all reason for life may have some root in the poet's own experiences. After all, as a British soldier, Wilfred Owen was surrounded by death on a regular basis throughout World War I. For the speaker of this poem, who has seen countless soldiers die, this particular dead soldier would have just been one of many people killed and returned to the earth.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "Woke once the clays of a cold star."
- **Line 12:** "Was it for this the clay grew tall?"



VOCABULARY

Half-sown (Line 3) - The act of *sowing* is that of planting seeds in a field. A field that is half-sown is therefore only half-filled with seeds.

Rouse (Line 6) - *Rouse* means to stir or wake up.

Seeds (Line 8) - *Seeds* refers to plants that grow in response to sunlight, as if waking up.

Clay (Line 9, Line 12) - *Clay* refers to the dirt that human beings originally came from according to creation stories from around the world, including the Bible's.

Full-nerved (Line 11) - *Full-nerved*, or "full of nerves," is a description that refers to the system of nerves in the human body. They become "too hard to stir," or unable to function, after death.

Fatuous (Line 13) - *Fatuous* means pointless or unnecessary.

Toil (Line 13) - *Toil* means to work very hard, often without pause.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem's form resembles that of a [sonnet](#), given that it is fourteen lines, although its rhyme scheme and structure are slightly different.

One structure of the sonnet that the poem does clearly borrow, however, is that of the *volta*, which is the "turn" a sonnet takes as it transitions from one subject or tone to another around its halfway point. In "Futility," there is a clear *volta* between the first and second stanzas (in a traditional sonnet, this *volta* would instead occur at line 9). In the first stanza, the speaker exudes a calm and positive tone while describing the "gentle" touches of sunlight on the dead soldier, as well as nurturing the hope that the "kind old sun" will know a way to stave off death. In the second stanza, the poem's tone shifts to one of discouragement and perplexity at the possibility that life is actually "futile."

It should be noted that, historically, sonnets are associated with love. "Futility" also deals with love, albeit in a new manner. The poem depicts love for the speaker's fallen comrade, as well as love for life itself, despite its futility. In this way, the poem both reference poetics traditions and reinvents them for its own purposes.

METER

"Futility" has a subtle meter. Each stanza's first and last lines follow a loose [iambic trimeter](#), while all other lines between them follow an iambic [tetrameter](#).

Take line 7, for example, which shows iambic trimeter:

The kind | old sun | will know.

And now look at line 12, which shows iambic tetrameter:

Was it | for this | the clay | grew tall?

These are very traditional meters for English poetry. In using them, the poem might be pushing the reader to see it as engaging with poetry of the past.

However, the poem doesn't always follow these meters exactly. For instance, each [stanza](#) begins with a [trochee](#) instead of an iamb. In fact, the first stanza starts off with two trochees:

Move him | into | the sun—

And the second starts off with one:

Think how | it wakes | the seeds—

By beginning on stressed syllables, these lines emphasize their

status as commands. They force the reader to pay attention to their orders: to "move" the dead soldier and to "think."

Sometimes Owen also disrupts the metrical flow of each line via [caesuras](#). For instance, in line 11 the stresses bunch up as commas interrupt the line, so that the first two feet can be read as spondees:

Full-nerved, | still warm, | too hard | to stir

This bunching up mimics the image it describes: an immobile body packed with nerves, blood, and heat. In general, the poem uses these disruptions of meter to push against the tradition it's borrowing from. It wants the reader to see how it *distances* itself from past depictions of war.

A more uniform pattern, however, exists in the syllable count of each stanza. Each line in the first stanza also contains the same number of syllables as its counterpart in the second stanza, with the exception of one line pair (lines 4 and 11, which are only one syllable off).

This metrical mirroring suggests an intriguing relationship between the two stanzas—that they act as thematic mirrors of one other. Each stanza concerns itself with the sun's power to create life, but the first has an optimistic view while the second has a pessimistic view.

RHYME SCHEME

"Futility" contains many [pararhymes](#) and more general [slant rhymes](#). This makes its [rhyme scheme](#) slightly difficult to perceive. However, despite this subtlety, the poem's rhyme scheme can be stated as follows:

ABABCCC DEDEFFF

Almost all the poem's end rhymes are slant rhymes. In contrast to [perfect rhymes](#), these slant rhymes suggest a feeling of imperfection and uncertainty. They create a kind of out-of-tune, dissonant music, which mimics the distressing emotions of the battlefield.

There are only two moments of perfect rhyme in the poem, which occur in lines 5 and 7 ("snow" and "know"), and lines 12 and 14 ("tall" and "all"). Both these perfect rhymes occur in the same spots in each stanza: namely, on the first and third C rhymes in the first stanza, and the first and third F rhymes in the second. Furthermore, each of these sets of perfect rhyme contains a slant rhyme between them ("now" and "toil," respectively). It's as if the poem is suggesting that there's always a kernel of uncertainty wedged in moments of certainty—whether that be certainty in the "kind old sun," or certainty in the futility of life.

In other words, the poem's rhyme scheme conveys how the poem stays in conflict with itself. Its combination of slant and perfect rhymes depicts the uncertainty of soldiers' emotional lives, showing how they are unable to fully embrace either hope

on one hand, or cynicism on the other.



CONTEXT



SPEAKER

Although the speaker of a poem is a separate entity from the author, each figure is inextricably linked in "Futility," given its wartime. Wilfred Owen was a soldier during World War I, and the speaker in "Futility" is also a soldier. During his life as a soldier, Owen likely experienced events very similar to those the poem describes. The poem's themes of life, death, and futility are themes that preoccupied Owen throughout his life as a poet-soldier. It's possible, then, to think of "Futility" as representing a distinct moment in the thoughts and feelings of the real-life person Wilfred Owen. However, it's more precise to refer to a specific speaker that Owen *constructs* in this poem, a speaker who in turn observes a scene that may or may not have happened.

This speaker witnesses the death of a comrade. Initially, the speaker seems to possess a reverence for life, as exhibited in his or her descriptions of a "kind old sun." However, the speaker then turns to questioning life's entire purpose, suggesting that life is futile. With this duality, the poem seems to suggest that a soldier can hold both perspectives throughout the highs and lows of war, both savoring life and questioning its meaning.



SETTING

The setting of "Futility" is a battlefield in France, presumably during World War I (which was also the setting of Wilfred Owen's own experience as a soldier). There is snow on the ground and plenty of sunlight, suggesting that it's winter and that the sky is bright and blue. The weather is cold, as evidenced by the snow, but also contains tinges of warmth thanks to the sun. Given that the first line is an instruction spoken to someone else ("Move him into the sun"), the speaker is likely not alone, but rather in the company of other soldiers.

The poem also references other settings that help inform its themes. In the first [stanza](#), the speaker imagines the pleasant farm the dead soldier grew up on. In the second stanza, the speaker imagines a more ambitious setting: the Earth at the moment that life first appears. The poem metaphorically describes the early Earth as a "cold star," evoking a barren and silvery world, devoid of life. As the sun shines on this world, the "clay," or dirt, begins to wake up and grow (an [allusion](#) to creation myths from around the world), becoming all the living things on Earth. These imagined settings help put the war against a background of immense life and growth.

LITERARY CONTEXT

Both "Futility" and its author, Wilfred Owen, are fixtures of the larger literary genre of World War I poetry. World War I was characterized by a distinct form of brutality and loss, thanks to a new wave of combat technology in the early 20th century and to the harsh fighting conditions of trench warfare. The resulting poetry is just as distinct, and it depicted subjects like nationhood, trauma, nature, and the human body in ways that literature hadn't done before. In fact, World War I can be seen as inaugurating the period of literary [Modernism](#), in which writers rejected the ideals of past generations and searched for new forms of expression.

Owen's other poems, for instance, tend to be far more graphic than "Futility," detailing the physical toll of fighting in European trenches. In general, his poems question old ideals such as patriotism or glory, instead focusing on the gritty details of war that poetry from the past tended to ignore.

It's important to note that World War I poets included soldiers as well as civilians, who had an altogether different but no less profound experience of the war. Some other poets of World War I include [Thomas Hardy](#), [Rupert Brooke](#), [Katharine Tynan](#), [Alice Corbin Henderson](#), and [Siegfried Sassoon](#), each of whom inspired later poets to respond to the wars of their own time. For instance, Yusef Komunyakaa writes about a physical memorial in his poem, "[Facing It](#)," to confront the relationship between the Vietnam War and memory. This physical imagery of this poem can be compared with the imagery in Owen's work.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The historical context of Owen's "Futility" is World War I. Millions of people died in the war, so it follows that much of the poetry written in response concerns death. World War I divided Europe into two major factions: the Allied powers, which included Great Britain, France, Russia, Italy, and the United States, and the Central Powers, which included Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and Bulgaria. Almost an entire continent was at war.

The vast majority of the war was fought on land and prominently featured a style of warfare known as "trench warfare," in which soldiers dug trenches in fields, launching projectiles and otherwise attacking opposing trenches. The dangerous and unsanitary conditions of the trenches, combined with the soldiers' weapons of choice (which ranged from grenades, to bayonets, to poisonous gas), led to a degree of brutality and slaughter that is almost beyond description. Furthermore, these conditions were totally new. European nations that had previously valorized war were shocked, and people had to reevaluate how they related to the ideals of the

past, such as patriotism.



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- ["Futility" Reading \(Audio\)](#) — The English actor Alex Jennings reads "Futility" aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CM_OK2VFIE8)
- [Wilfred Owen's "Insensibility"](#) — Although it focuses more on his other poem, "Insensibility," this article by the Poetry Foundation explicates Owen's larger poetic perspective on war. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/70211/wilfred-owen-insensibility>)
- [The Wilfred Owen Association](#) — The Wilfred Owen Association is a British organization dedicated to promoting Owen's life and poetic work. (<http://www.wilfredowen.org.uk/>)
- [Wilfred Owen's Biography and Works](#) — The Academy of American Poets website, apart from being a premier resource for all things poetry, has information about Owen's biography and notable works. (<https://poets.org/poet/wilfred-owen>)

- [The Poetry of World War I](#) — This article by the Poetry Foundation lists many of the great poems written about (and mostly during) World War I. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/70139/the-poetry-of-world-war-i>)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILFRED OWEN POEMS

- [Anthem for Doomed Youth](#)
- [Dulce et Decorum Est](#)
- [Exposure](#)
- [Strange Meeting](#)



HOW TO CITE

MLA

Kneisley, John. "Futility." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 8 May 2019. Web. 22 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Kneisley, John. "Futility." LitCharts LLC, May 8, 2019. Retrieved April 22, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/wilfred-owen/futility>.