

Mametz Wood

The adjective "wasted" suggests the young soldiers lost their lives before they had really started living

The opening lines emphasise how deadly the battle was as they found the remains for "years afterwards".

For years afterwards the farmers found them - the wasted young, turning up under their plough blades as they tended the land back into itself.

The verb "tended" personifies the land, suggesting that the farmers tried to care for the wounded surface that was so badly damaged by the war.

"A chit" is a short note and indicates that these pieces of bone contain a message for us about the brutalities of war.

A chit of bone, the china plate of a shoulder blade, the relic of a finger, the blown and broken bird's egg of a skull,

The metaphors of a "china plate" and "broken bird's egg" emphasise how fragile and precious the human body is.

all mimicked now in flint, breaking blue in white across this field where they were told to walk, not run, towards the wood and its nesting machine guns.

The command "to walk, not run" creates a cynical tone to the poem - the poet clearly felt the orders sent the soldiers to their deaths.

Here the poem switches to the present tense and makes the tragedy seem more immediate and real for the reader. The horrors of war are still being felt today and remind us of the fatal consequences of conflict.

And even now the earth stands sentinel, reaching back into itself for reminders of what happened like a wound working a foreign body to the surface of the skin.

In stanza four Sheers again personifies the land. The noun "sentinel" links back to soldiers standing watch all night and suggests the land cannot rest because of the horrors it has seen in war. The simile "like a wound working a foreign body" suggests the land is trying to cleanse itself of the damage that has been done.

This morning, twenty men buried in one long grave, a broken mosaic of bone linked arm in arm, their skeletons paused mid dance-macabre

The noun "mosaic" suggests the intricate and beautiful nature of the human body

in boots that outlasted them, their socketed heads tilted back at an angle and their jaws, those that have them, dropped open.

The phrase "linked arm in arm" suggests the soldiers were close as a division and stayed together as a team, even in death.

As if the notes they had sung have only now, with this unearthing, slipped from their absent tongues.

Soldiers often sang to keep their spirits up in the darker moments of war. Welsh divisions were particularly well-known for their songs.

Owen Sheers

The final stanza creates a haunting tone. The adjective "absent" suggests the men's voices were lost in battle - they were silenced by their generals and then the machine guns. Only now, "with this unearthing", is the truth emerging.

Mametz Wood by Owen Sheers

The one where farmers find broken bones in their fields

Key quotations

- The poem opens with the phrase “For years afterwards...” which suggests that the horror of war, and this particular tragedy still affects us
- The language, such as “china plate”, “broken bird’s egg of a skull”, the broken “mosaic of bone” used suggests that the soldiers were vulnerable and fragile
- The poem’s stanzas alternate between ideas to do with the land, “the earth stands sentinel” and imagery to do with the bones of the dead soldiers. The earth is a witness to the tragedy
- The imagery evokes the horror of war. The “socketed heads tilted back at an angle” brutally visualises the moment the men were shot and their screams of pain
- Final words – “their absent tongues”, suggests that the soldiers have finally found a voice. The final stanza combines both elements of the alternating stanzas and suggests that the poem is about offering redemption or justice, both for the dead and the land

Context

- *Mametz Wood* was one of the bloodiest battles of World War One. As part of the first Battle of the Somme in 1916, soldiers of the Welsh division were ordered to take *Mametz Wood*, the largest area of trees on the battlefield
- The 38th Welsh Division lost 4,000 men during the attack which lasted five days
- The poet Owen Sheers grew up in Wales and wrote the poem in 2005 as he felt their bravery and sacrifice was never really acknowledged

Structure:

- The poem’s structure is in regular three-line stanzas almost reflecting the neat linear pattern of a ploughed field. However, at times the length of the lines change, with longer lines breaking up the neat form. This disrupted pattern could reflect the ‘chits of bone’ rising out of the ground and disrupting our attempts to forget the past
- The first part of the poem focuses on the land itself before the focus shifts to the bones and dead soldiers in the final stanzas. The concluding stanza brings all the elements together

Possible Themes and Links

- War, suffering, patriotism – Dulce et Decorum Est, A Wife in London, The Soldier
- Fragility of soldiers/human life – Manhunt