

The portrayal of war in 'attack' and 'anthem for doomed youth'



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Both the poems 'Attack' and 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' (AFDY) portray World War 1 from a negative perspective. Although they are written in slightly different ways, the two create a clear image about the indignity of death in battle. In 'Attack', Sassoon focuses more on the environmental factors - as he describes what can be seen from the battlefield e. g. 'the glowering sun'. However, in 'AFDY' the poet takes a more relaxed and emotive approach and reflects on WW1's side effects at home. Both scenes from the poems are sculpted by the expressive language; in 'Attack' the tone is harsher so the atmosphere of a battlefield is created by the strong terminology. Whereas in 'AFDY' the language is more gentle and reflective, therefore a calm, thoughtful atmosphere is produced to mark the respect for the soldiers.

Concentrating on Siegfried Sassoon's poem 'Attack', we can see that the event takes place right in the centre of a war zone. The poet not only describes the weapons and brutality of the conditions, but he also captures some of the soldiers' pure emotions as they prepare to fight to the death. Generally, there appears to be a strong sense of hatred and anger in the air; Sassoon quotes 'in the wild purple of the glowering sun'. The word 'glowering' means 'frowning'/'scowling' and so this makes it seem as if the sun is glaring down at the soldiers in such a way that it is ashamed of them for fighting one another. This phrase is also personification; the writer describes the sun as though it's a human being who can emotionally respond to WW1. Sassoon uses a metaphor as he describes the soldiers' faces as 'masked with fear', which reveals that they genuinely are terrified - to the extent that they have been 'possessed' and therefore appear petrified. Another quote

states 'hope with furtive eyes and grappling fists, flounders in mud'. This shows how desperate everyone is; hope itself is almost completely lost amongst the dirt, weapons and corpses that lie as a result of war. An additional technique used is listing - Sassoon uses the phrase 'bombs and guns and shovels and battle gear' which repeats the word 'and' 3 times. This repetition emphasizes the negative things and it's more effective than just putting in commas to 'disguise' the fact that there's so many unfavorable factors of war.

Looking at Wilfred Owen's 'Anthem for Doomed Youth', the writer compares the different atmospheres during the war, contrasting the mood of a battlefield to the mood of a loving home. Unlike 'Attack', this poem consists of soft, sweet language when talking about the respect the soldiers deserve, yet a strong sense of pain is also portrayed. One of the few techniques Owen uses is alliteration; 'only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle' and the repetition of 'r' creates a harsh, realistic sound of guns on a battle field and this really helps to set the scene. An alternate technique used is anaphora - the second and third lines of the poem repeat 'Only' at the beginning of each phrase, even though it's hidden amongst the other wide range of techniques, it still adds effect which helps Owen gradually build up momentum in the poem. Moving further on the anger and intensity dies down, and is replaced with sadness; line 8 says 'bugles calling them from sad shires'. This quote unfolds the sorrow that lies within the soldiers' homes; bugles signify the end as they are often played at funerals. In the first octet of the poem, the tone is a lot more serious and bitter, as to produce an angry mood - it appears that the poet himself is rather irritated by the fact that these soldiers

deserve so much but are given so little. On the other hand, in the sestet the mood changes and a mindful, soothing atmosphere takes over. Owen quotes 'their flowers the tenderness of patient minds', as he is expressing flowers as loved-ones' thoughts - this is trying to say that although the soldiers may not have genuine flowers to mark their deaths, they do have their families' loving wishes which are just like flowers in their own way. This metaphor reveals the love amongst families as they continue to support each other through the tough times of WW1. This side of the war isn't really shown in 'Attack' - Sassoon only focuses on the terror from the war zone, though Owen's poem is more balanced as he reflects on WW1 from two honest aspects.

Even though the poems appear to be quite different when we look at them closely, there are also lots of similarities between them too. For example, they both use personification to sculpt the atmosphere in the poem; in 'Attack' Sassoon uses the phrase 'tanks creep' and in 'AFDY' Owen quotes 'the stuttering rifles'. This technique created an image and feel to what it would really seem like to be in the war - tanks slowly and slyly crawling toward you, the sound of rifles continuously pattering and ringing in your ears. Furthermore, the two writers have decided to use iambic pentameter in each of their compositions; meaning that each line follows the pattern of approximately 10 syllables. This technique isn't very obvious to spot but it does make quite a difference to the poetry - as you read along each line you can pick up the bouncy rhythm varying from stressed to unstressed syllables. This just generally structures the verses and also helps to form a beat that produces a battlefield atmosphere. Moreover, Sassoon and Owen

use alliteration in their writing - 'dusk a drawing-down' and 'time ticks blank'; the repetition of the letter 'd' creates quite a dreary and dull feel and likewise with 't' a sound of a clock ticking comes into mind. This is very clever; as both authors have really thought about how to set the scene and these examples of alliteration reflect the mannerism of the text.

There are many contrasts in the two poems, as the writers have different styles in which they choose to write in. Firstly, the general tones of the poems are slightly dissimilar. Looking at 'Attack' although Sassoon has embedded a wide variety of imaginative techniques into his poem, there's still quite a stately and solemn timbre. Sassoon doesn't refer to the reader at all and he keeps the concept short and sweet, while Owen uses rhetorical questions not only to create effect, but to also intrigue the reader into his writing - he opens straight away with the question 'What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?' This diction makes the poem seem less formal and more like a conversation/ debate.

Another difference between 'Attack' and 'AFDY' is the choice of sound from the letters - the phrases in 'Attack' produce much more bitter and sharp sounds to indicate a battle. E. g. 'lines of grey, muttering faces, masked with fear'; the words in bold jump out at the reader as they are strong, powerful but also negative words. On the other hand, in the sestet in 'AFDY' the phrase 'Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds' produces a calm and mellifluous feeling of peace and respect, due to the soft and gentle-sounding vocabulary. Lastly, Sassoon appears to generalize the whole concept of war as utterly terrible, however in Owen's poem we can see that WW1 wasn't completely horrible; as it brought families closer together and made people

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realize how lucky they were and they began to cherish the precious things in life - so in some ways maybe WW1 was a lesson to everyone. In 'Attack' the end quote states 'O Jesu, make it stop!', this desperate cry implies that WW1 was dreadful and nothing more, but Owen sets out an equalized argument revealing the reasonably positive side effects of WW1 as well.

Overall 'Attack' appears to talk about the harsh and devilish side of war, based on the idea of desperate soldiers fighting to the death and living in pure fear throughout the whole experience, and the hatred and resentment that the war leaves behind. 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' also talks about the brutality of war, discussing the eerie sounds of wails on the battlefield and the anger of what little respect soldiers are given out in war. However, Owen looks at WW1 from the families' points of view, and he digs deep into their emotions of love bonding them together and their strong sense of pride for their loved ones who have helped their country. Both these poems use different techniques to help set the scene and produce a relevant atmosphere, e. g. personification and alliteration.