ANTHEM FOR DOOMED YOUTH SYMBOLISM, IMAGERY, ALLEGORY

Symbol Analysis

In "Anthem for Doomed Youth," war is not what we might expect. Owen is all about exploring how war can twist the way we see the world; men become cattle, artillery shells become choirs, and tears become candles. Things in a world at war are not as they seem. In our speaker's eyes, the rituals of mourning the fallen become mockeries, because they ring so hollow in the face of war's true horrors.

- Line 1: Using a simile to compare the battlefield deaths of soldiers to the slaughter of cattle conveys both the inhumanity of these soldiers' deaths, and also that they just might be dying without really understanding why. They're headed off to slaughter, no questions asked.

- Line 2: Attributing anger, a very human emotion, to the guns, which are mere machines – is the first instance of personification in a poem that uses an awful lot of personification. It's interesting to note that while the soldiers are being dehumanized, the instruments of war are actually, in a strange and terrifying way, becoming more human. Yowza.

- Line 3: The anaphora at the beginning of this sentence (starting with "Only the," just like the line before) helps build momentum, since when we hit the phrase a second time we pay a little more attention. If something's repeated it's supposed to be important, right? Plus, that momentum and the repetition of "only" add to the tension and horror of the battlefield, where there's nothing but shells and dying men.

- Line 3: The alliteration at the end of the line—"rifles' rapid rattle"—is another way of grabbing our attention and building the intensity. Ramping up the momentum and intensity is obviously very important here, since our speaker's throwing us into the middle of a war zone, and must get the sheer terror across to us through the language.

- Lines 3-4: Adding on to that alliteration is some more consonance. Just check out all those double "t" words—"stuttering," "rattle," and "patter." And, hey, why not throw in that "p" sound in "rapid" while you're at it? Beyond being fun to say aloud, all this consonance also mimics the sound of the rifles firing. After all there's a lot of "r" and "t" sounds, and what's the way we usually represent gunfire? Yup: "ratatat tat" (or something like that). So all those sounds give us a sensory experience of the battlefield. Not only are we reading about it; we feel like we're there.

- Line 7: The implied metaphor here (the shells are demented choirs) continues the trend of personifying the weapons of war, but we should also notice that it goes the other way as well by turning humans and human institutions (choir members and churches) into inanimate weapons. The metaphor, by comparing them, blurs the lines between a choir singing for the glory of God and country, and the shelling that just might be a result of, or at the very least related to, that same nationalistic and patriotic fervor.
MOURNING RITUALS IMAGERY

If you've got soldiers dying out in the trenches, chances are you've got some mourners back home. And the woeful widows and forlorn family members are having quite a different experience than those fighting guys out there in the heat of battle. So while the soldiers die senselessly—like cattle—the men and women back home are forced to try to make sense of it all with grieving rituals, songs, funerals and the like. But can those rituals ever equal the true experience of war? Probably not, says Owen.

- Line 1: Ritual *numéro uno* comes to us in the form of a rhetorical question. These "passing-bells" are a traditional (and religious) way to mark someone's death. But when thousands die at once on the battlefield, no bell rings for the individuals. And are there any sort of bells ringing out the deaths of these soldiers? Owen answers us with a resounding no, which is implied by the lines that follow.

- Line 2-4: So instead of the ritual of "passing-bells," we're stuck with endless machine gun fire. That sound is a stand-in for the more traditional ritual of prayer.

- Line 5: Bells? Prayers? No, says Owen, they're nowhere to be found on the battlefield. And that means that when we perform these rituals at home, we're really just making a mockery of the real stuff that's going down on the front.

- Line 6: Funerals often have a song or two to send off the dead, right? But there are no funerals on the battlefield, and that means that artillery shells will have to metaphorically stand in for the choirs of a church.

- Line 9: Here we are with another mourning ritual (the lighting of candles) and another rhetorical question.

- Line 10: In this line, the ritual of candle lighting is replaced by the much more sincere act of crying.

- Line 12: And the ritual of putting a pall on a coffin is replaced here by the more sincere image of a grieving face.

- Line 13: The metaphor here connects the ritual of putting flowers on a grave with the patience and tenderness of those waiting at home. It might be suggesting that the compassion of others is as useful to the dying soldier as flowers on his grave (so, not very useful). Or it might be contrasting the two, with the compassion being a much more fitting and suitable way of mourning than the act of bringing flowers to a gravestone.

- Line 14: This last line, as you can probably tell, is an image. But it's also a symbol that works in a number of ways. First, the setting of dusk reminds us (as if we need reminding at this point) of death. The drawing down of blinds might also be read as signifying the refusal to see all that icky darkness and death. This, we think, is not a good thing for our speaker. He wants us to see the darkness and suffering, and to acknowledge the terrible cruelties of war. It's the willing ignorance of such things, perhaps, that makes war such an easy sell. But it could also depict the
much more sincere, ritual-less private grief that the mourners experience, when all the pomp and circumstance of a ceremonially funeral is over, and they're left alone.

FORM AND METER

Sonnet, Iambic Pentameter

"Anthem for Doomed Youth" is a sonnet written mostly in iambic pentameter. Right? Right. For you poets and poetesses out there, that might sound like a no brainer. But for those of you who are new to poetry, will give you a quick and dirty explanation.

The sonnet is a fourteen-line poem with a rhyme scheme (of which there are several versions). We can thank the Italians for this one; a dude named Petrarch perfected the form, and his influence brought it over into realm of English literature. In fact, Thomas Wyatt was the first guy to translate Petrarch’s Italian sonnets into English, which happened in the early 16th century.

Wyatt and his bro buddy, the Earl of Surrey, then gave these new English sonnets their rhyming meter, and divided them up a little differently, much to everyone's delight. Pretty soon, all kinds of poets were trying their hands at them. Shakespeare wrote a few (and by "a few" we mean 154), and pretty much every poet since has at least dabbled in the form.

The sonnet has been around for a while, so it's had time to reinvent itself, several times over. There are a bunch of different kinds of sonnets now, with exciting names like Petrarchan, Shakespearean, and Spenserian. (Just think: if you become a literary giant and invent your own rhyme scheme, you could have a kind of sonnet named after you. Yep, you!)

Owen Owes Us a Sonnet

Owen went old school on "Anthem for Doomed Youth." He chose the Petrarchan sonnet form from way way back, but then he added a little dose of Big Willy and went for the more Shakespearean rhyme scheme of ABABCDCEFDGG. How'd we figure that out?

Check out the ends of the lines in the octet (that's the first, eight-line stanza of the poem). Cattle from line 1 rhymes with rattle from line 3 (and guns rhymes with orisons). Bells and shells rhyme, while choirs and shires have their own thing going on.

Then take a gander at the sestet, or the final, six-line stanza of the poem. All rhymes with pall, eyes with byes, and minds with blinds. Simple enough, right?

In typical sonnets, the break between the first eight lines—the octet—and the last six lines—the sestet—marks some sort of shift in the poem. A change of course, a transition between ideas, a problem and then its solution. In the case of "Anthem for Doomed Youth," the shift is between the battlefield, and the quieter, less action-packed world of civilians at home.

I Am Pentameter

A sonnet is hardly a sonnet without a bit of iambic pentameter. What's that, you say? Allow me to explain:
An iamb is a rhythmic foot (yep, foot) made up of a stressed and unstressed syllable (da-DUM) and pentameter means there are five of those feet in a row. That makes for about ten syllables per line and a rhythm like "and each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds" (14). Of course, in this poem as in many, it's more of a prevailing pattern than a strict rhythm that must always be used.

But here's the thing. For all its iambic-ness and all its pentameter posturing, this poem sure does deviate from its own rules. Just look at the first line:

*What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?* (1)

Uh, Owen? We count eleven syllables.

And what about line 2?:

*Only the monstrous anger of the guns*

That's not exactly perfect iambic pentameter. In fact, Owen substitutes what's called a trochee (think of it as the opposite of an iamb: DA-dum), for the usual iamb.

Owen includes all kinds of variations like these—extra syllables, non-iambic feet, and the like throughout the poem. He's constantly keeping us on our toes, unsettling us as readers so that we can never get too comfy with the rituals of grief. We're meant to be off kilter, upset, and troubled. If we grow too at ease, we're missing the point.