Bayonet Charge

Ted Hughes – Ted Hughes (1930-1998) was an English poet and children's writer, who served as the Poet Laureate between 1984 and his death. Bayonet Charge is unusual for a Hughes poem in that it focuses on a nameless soldier in the WWI – although he did write other war-themed poems, much of his work focused instead on nature and the animal kingdom in particular, and myths and legends. His father had fought in the war.

World War I – World War I, also known as the ‘Great War’, was a global war originating in Europe that took place from July 1914 to November 1918 ('Over the Top') – it was fought between the Allies (including Russia, France, UK, and USA) against the Alliance (Germany, Austro-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire) Over 9 million armed forces and 7 million civilians were killed in the war. The Bayonet Charge is unusual for a Hughes poem in the Poet Laureate between 1984 and his death.

The Bayonet – a bladed weapon that is similar to a short sword or blade. It is designed to be lashed onto or undermounted to the muzzle of a rifle or similar firearm. From the 17th Century, up until WWI, the bayonet was a primary weapon for infantry attacks and combat at close quarters. It also served as a general purpose survival knife (when detached). Famously, those attacking in WWI were often mown down by machine guns before they had opportunity to use them.

Context – Bayonet Charge was written by Ted Hughes, and was first published in 1957.

## Language/Structural Devices

**Justuxtaposition** – Hughes places violent imagery alongside descriptions of nature, to demonstrate how out of place and uncomfortable the events of the war are. For example, he describes the pain and discomfort of the soldier as he stumbles around, suffocated by ‘whiff fire’ and ‘bullets’, yet juxtaposes language used to describe the soldier’s挥汗如注 field of clods and ‘green hedge.’ Positioning the two ideas next to one another emphasizes the extent of both, showing how preposterous the war seems.

**Varied Verbs** – Varied verbs are used to show the reader the manner in which actions are completed, telling us a great deal about the soldier himself and his environment. For example, ‘stumbling’ demonstrates the soldier’s displeasure, whilst ‘lugged’ shows the physical strain and discomfort that the soldier is experiencing. Furthermore, ‘dazzled’ and ‘smacking’ show portrait to the reader the depth of confusion and violence that are prevalent on No Man’s Land.

**Personification/Metaphors** – Hughes’ use of figurative language gives the poem a violent undercurrent, demonstrating the pain and suffering of the warzone. Bullets are personified as ‘smacking’ the sky, presenting both so violence and the animal kingdom in particular, and myths and legends. His father had fought in the war.

## Structure

- **Stanza**
- **Line**
- **Poem**
- **Analysis**

1. Suddenly he awoke and was running - raw
2. In raw-seamed hot khati, his sweat heavy.
3. Stumbling across a field of clods towards a green hedge
4. That dazzled with rifle fire, hearing
5. Bullets smacking the belly out of the air -
6. He lugged a rifle nump as a smashed arm:
7. The patriotic tear that had brimm from his eye
8. Sweating like molten iron from the centre of his chest -
9. In bewilderment then he almost stopped -
10. In what cold starch of the stars and the nations
11. Was he the hand pointing that second? He was running
12. Like a man who has jumped up in the dark and runs
13. Listening between his footsteps for the reason
14. Of his still running, and his foot hung like
15. Statuary in mid-stribe. Then the shot-slushed farrows
16. Threw up a yellow yare that rolled like a flame
17. And crawled in a threeshire circle, its mouth wide
18. Open silent, its eyes standing out.
19. He plunged past with his bayonet toward the green hedge.
20. King, honour, human dignity, etcetera
21. Dropped liked luxuries in a yelling alarm
22. To get out of that blue crackling air
23. His terror’s touchy dynamite.

## Poems for Comparison

- **Bayonet Charge** can be compared and contrasted with these poems in its approach to pain and suffering.

## Influences on the Poet

- **Exposure/Photographer**

- **Charge of the Light Brigade**

## Themes

- **Suffering** – In addition to the mental anguish that the soldier endures, a physical undercurrent of pain and suffering is evident throughout the poem. In stanza 1, for example, the soldier’s discomfort is made clear through vocabulary such as ‘raw’ and ‘sweat.’ The image of the injured hare in stanza 3 represents his stricken comrades.

- **The Futility of War** – The poem portrays one of the most terrifying acts of this or any war, the charge ‘over the top.’ This was close to a suicide mission, as they were exposed to machine guns and shells. The soldier seems to stop still in time (stanzas 2 and 3) and question the rationale for carrying out his actions ‘Running…for a reason.’

## Line-by-Line Analysis

- **An anonymous soldier charges across no man’s land. The use of the word ‘over’ opens the poem and thrusts the reader immediately into the action. The soldier seems to have a sense of realism – this isn’t a nightmare. Suggests powerful events have been a haze in comparison. Repetition of the word ‘raw’ and ‘cold’ shows the ‘frigid’ ‘clods’ which are often ‘lugged’ to be ‘heavy sweat’ suggest he is inexperienced and uncomfortable. Violent imagery is used to describe the warzone – personalisation of the bullets ‘smacking’ the belly out of the air. Similar lines in lines 6 & 8 further describe his discomfort.**

- **The land around is described as ‘hot-slushed’, giving an image of the carnage that is taking place. From beneath, an injured hare emerges, trampled against with pain ‘thristing’, ‘mouth wide’, ‘like a flame.’ This symbolises wounded comrades – not literally mentioned in order to present his isolation. Alliteration of the harsh ‘p’ sound in ‘plunged past’ shows the unnaturalness of what he is doing, juxtaposed with the image of nature (green hedge!). Line 20 – reasons to go to war – ‘etcetera’ suggests they are not worth listing. The sin on 21 – ‘though from taking out of desperation – not moral principle. The last line shows the ease with which he may lose control.**

- **The big, ever-present, overshadowing thing was the First World War, in which my father and my Uncle fought, and which seemed to have killed every other young man my relative had known.’ About his father’s experience in war “I never questioned him directly. I never believed it, even when I was told. He managed to convey the horror so readily that it fairly tortured me when he did speak about it.” “My 1st world war nightmare – a dream late of the time, in my father’s memory. How can one confront or come to terms with it.”**