

## Bayonet Charge, by Ted Hughes

This poem imagines the mental state of a soldier in World War I as he participates in a charge over No-man's land towards the enemy lines. There is no indication as to whether the soldier is fighting for the Allies (The British Empire, the United States etc.) or the Axis powers (Germany, Turkey etc.) This is deliberate – it is the emotions that the soldier feels that are the important things, and these emotions were universal to all soldiers on both sides.

Ted Hughes hadn't even been born during WWI, so he was writing entirely from his own imagination. However, it is generally accepted that he succeeded in capturing the mindset of a soldier in such a charge.

The action of the poem is as follows: The soldier suddenly comes to his senses (“awoke”) to find that he is in the middle of the charge. He suffers from complete confusion, not only about what is going on, but also about the larger picture; he has no idea about the situation, but just runs because he has been told to. He charges towards the enemy lines, who are firing a large number of rifles from a green hedge in front of him. The aim of the charge is to take control of that hedge, so he is forced to run towards it, straight into the hail of machine gun bullets. At some point, the bullets hitting the ground scare a hare out of its burrow and cause it to run around in absolute terror. It's possible also that the hare has been wounded. Either way, the soldier ignores it and simply runs on past towards the hedge.

### Themes of the poem

1. *Confusion*. The soldier suddenly realises in mid-charge that he has no reason why any of this is happening. The poem refers to “the cold clockwork of the stars and nations”, meaning the inevitability of the working out of the war, planned by important people such as politicians, diplomats and top generals. As a lowly common soldier, he is not allowed to know about all this planning – he is given the job of charging the enemy trench and simply expected to do it.
2. *Terror*. Both the soldier and the hare suffer from intense, mindless terror. The soldier is almost robbed of the ability to think, simply becoming a sort of machine that runs towards the enemy. The hare has no mind to lose, and can only feel terror. It is described as running around in circles in confusion, with its mouth wide open and its eyes bulging – the only way it has of expression its alarm.

This emotion is heightened by making every description in the poem an extreme one. There are enemy shooters in the hedge, but their numbers are exaggerated by describing the hedge using the word “dazzling”. This implies that the muzzle flashes from the rifles are so numerous that they make the hedge twinkle brightly with light. The sound of the bullets being fired is made more intense by likening them to the sharp (and painful) slap of human flesh: “Bullets smacking the belly out of the air.” In the last verse, the air has almost become alive with intense sound and flashing of the enemy fire. It is described as “blue crackling air”, to give it the same impression that might be associated with a sharp lightning strike.

The poem ends with “His terror's touchy dynamite.” This could refer to the fact that soldier's nerves are stretched to breaking point (“touchy” meaning likely to snap at any moment), emphasized by comparing his terror to dynamite, which will suddenly explode, going from nothing to complete destruction in a tiny fraction of a second.

3. *Innocence/Lack of blame.* The soldier and the hare have this quality in common. Neither of them is to blame for their positions. Both of them find themselves in situations that are not of their making. In the case of the soldier, it is the politicians (or “higher ups” in general) who have put him (and every other soldier, of course) in this situation. The hare is the personification of innocence – it is a purely blameless animal caused anguish, terror, pain and probably death through no fault of its own.
4. *Imminent death.* Throughout the poem it is emphasized that the soldier is almost certain to die in the charge. The reference to dynamite tells us that death or, at least serious injury, will be instantaneous and strike at any moment.
5. *Pain and discomfort.* The soldier is also suffering from a great deal of pain. He is sweating profusely and, in these extreme circumstances, the sweat burns him like molten iron. Also the seams on his khaki uniform have rubbed his skin raw in places. His arm is so tired from carrying his rifle that it is numb – like a simple slab of meat rather than one of his limbs.
6. *The death of patriotism.* It is pointed out in the first verse that the soldier joined up with a tear of patriotism in his eye. Now that tear burns his very flesh, indicating that his patriotism has died. In the last verse, the poet mentions that all notions of king and country have been dropped, as the soldier cannot afford to think about these things in his current situation – they are useless luxuries which he has had to drop.

## Poetic techniques

Throughout the poem, Hughes uses various techniques to emphasize the message of the poem and make it more “punchy”.

*Alliteration and onomatopoeia:* The poem uses several words with sharp, hard letters that repeat themselves (alliteration), such as the repeated “k” sounds in “cold clockwork”, which might be thought of as resembling the sound of gunfire. Also the hard repeated “t” sounds in “terror's touchy dynamite”, which might indicate the fact that his nerves are at breaking point. In the first verse, the word “running” is immediately followed by “raw”, another example of alliteration.

Onomatopoeia occurs when a word sounds like its meaning – in this case words like “yelling”, which conjures up the idea of yelling mindlessly. The “shot-slashed furrows” are an example of both alliteration (repeated “s” sounds), but also onomatopoeia, as it resembles the hissing sound of the bullets as they slice through the ground.

*Repeated syllables:* There are no rhyming lines in this poem, but the poet repeats

syllables at different points, such as “stumbling” and “numb”, “honour” and “terror”.

*Contrast:* In the first verse, the tear of patriotic fervour in the man's eye as he signed up is contrasted with the bead of sweat that burns the soldier's chest as he charges. The attitude of the soldier on joining up (“King, honour, human dignity”) is contrasted with his attitude now – all that sentiment has been driven out of him by the immediate danger.

*Verse structure:* The poem starts *in media res* (in the middle of the action) in order to hook the reader's interest. Like the soldier, the reader is thrown straight into the action. The tension is kept up from one verse to the next using *enjambment*, which is the splitting of a sentence between two verses. The reader cannot simply read the second verse and then stop as that would mean only reading half a sentence, with the second half in verse three. This forces the reader onwards to the next verse, just as the soldier is forced onwards towards the enemy fire.

*Possible double meanings:* Different readers might read different meanings into words and phrases, and Hughes deliberately leaves some of these phrases ambiguous. For instance, when the soldier “awoke” in the first verse, that could be him snapping back to his senses and realising the immediacy of the battle, but it could also be taken to mean that he suddenly realises that the patriotism that had placed him in this situation turned out to be a complete lie.

## **Background**

The poem was first published in Hughes first anthology of his poems *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957). Various commentators (such as <https://poemanalysis.com/ted-hughes/bayonet-charge/>) point out that the view of warfare shown in *Bayonet Charge* tends to mimic the stormy relationship that Hughes had with his wife, the poetess, Sylvia Plath.

Hughes himself said that the inspiration for this poem was *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, and he wrote it remembering his father, his uncle and family friends who fought in WWI. His father fought in the Gallipoli campaign in Turkey, but survived the war.

## **Further sources**

<https://www.gradesaver.com/bayonet-charge>

<https://brightdreamsjournal.com/bayonet-charge-by-ted-hughes/>

<https://coleshill.warwickshire.sch.uk/files/2022/04/Bayonet-Charge-Ted-Hughes.pdf>