

J.M.S. COLLEGE, MUNGER
(A Constituent Unit under Munger University, Munger)
Department of English
B.A. Part-I, English (Hons.)- Paper II

Futility

-Wilfred Owen

Move him into the sun—
Gently its touch awoke him once,
At home, whispering of fields half-sown.
Always it woke him, even in France,
Until this morning and this snow.
If anything might rouse him now
The kind old sun will know.

Think how it wakes the seeds—
Woke once the clays of a cold star.
Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides
Full-nerved, still warm, too hard to stir?
Was it for this the clay grew tall?
—O what made fatuous sunbeams toil
To break earth's sleep at all?

Introduction:

"Futility" is a poem by Wilfred Owen, a British soldier during World War I. Written in 1918 (and published in Owen's lifetime), the poem elegizes an unnamed soldier lying dead in the snow in France. This image resonates with the poem's speaker, causing him or her to reassess life's value, given death's inevitability. Unlike Owen's other poems, which contain violent bodily imagery, this poem

features a calmer, more resigned tone, underlining the speaker's act of mourning the 'futility' of life in the face of death.

Analysis of the Poem "Futility":

The poem begins by addressing the companions of the dead soldier, urging them to 'move him into the sun'. In a land of such gridlocked clouds and perpetual rain, Owen makes much of the inclusion of light; light, in his poems, takes on the importance of a deity, aside from its obvious connections to Owen's own religious upbringing. By prompting the assembled soldiers to move him into the sun, Owen draws the image of the sun as a life-giving component, of a god who could wake up the soldier with its touch. He makes the landscape, and the environment, a living creation, ready and willing to awaken the soldier, and says so as much in the next few lines. Owen writes, "gently, its touch woke him once / At home, whispering of fields half-sown."

Given the subject and the context of the poem – a dead soldier – the references to home and to fields half-sown take on a bittersweet twist. It is not only that he is unlawfully young, dead because of this war, but the death itself has not allowed him to prepare anything. His fields are 'half-sown', he was unprepared to die. The reference to 'home' draws a parallel image of emptiness, of something that has been irreparably changed, and not allowed to return to its original form.

By drawing the connection between the sun, and home, and how it 'always woke him', even in France, Owen slips in a little bit of hope. The soldier fought for his country, Owen seems to be implying, partly to protect his home. He has always considered that he would return to it, not to be dead in a foreign field in France, left

to languor among the soil. Thus the first stanza ends on that lingering trace of hope – hope that is now dashed, as the soldier himself has died.

The second stanza opens with a similar image – that of soil, and seeds. It states, “Think how it wakes the seeds-” showing that life, regardless of the soldier’s death, will go on. Life has continued for much grander things, for much bigger things, for much more traumatic things; and, once again, Owen draws a connection between life, as the soil, and the man, now devoid of it. Once again, that tremor of hope lightens – as if by burying him, they might be able to bring the soldier back to life – but it is futile. There is no hope to awaken him, not now that he is dead, but yet Owen tries again – ‘woke once the clay of a cold star’, he writes, alluding to the Biblical story of man created out of Earth, of God populating the planet with people he had formed in his image.

There is so much hope in “Futility” that, throughout, the reader might even be lulled into believing that he will wake, that he will come back to the earth. Owen asks, “Are limbs, so dear achieved, are sides / Full-nerved, still warm, too hard to stir?” Why is it, says Owen, that earth lives, while man does not? Surely, it should be the other way around. This is Owen’s religious crises coming to a head, Owen’s understanding of religion slowly skewing towards the agnostic and the disbelieving.

The final few lines take a philosophical twist. Owen writes: “O what made fatuous sunbeams toil / To break earth’s sleep at all?”

Carrying on with the idea that the sun is also God, this is what Owen is asking, begging, to gain an answer to: why did God bother making man and making the Earth only to lead him to this? Were we created just to kill each other? “Futility” ends on the silence that follows, leaving the questions unanswered, and extinguishing all the sense of building hope that Owen has gently

grafted throughout the poem. There is no answer. There is nothing, Owen seems to be saying, but blood and senseless death.

The poet begins the poem talking of certain “Him”. It is obvious that the poet is talking about the Soldier. The anonymity points to his relegation of identity; and lack of individuality in a system that places the System over the individual. The anonymity of the dead soldier may also be employed for objectivity, and to render the experience universal-so as to point to the predicament of any soldier.

Theme:

Life and Death

Owen’s “Futility” elegizes an unnamed soldier lying dead in the snow in France. The speaker begins with a hopeful tone, wanting the sun to “rouse” the dead body, but shifts to one of confusion and disillusionment upon recognizing that death will always conquer life. Through this shift in tone, the poem uses the dead soldier as a catalyst for a larger, deeper mourning: that of the “futility” of the act of creation in the face of death’s inevitability.

The poem’s confident descriptions of the sun’s power to nourish life in the first stanza contrast with the way it doubts life’s purpose in the second stanza. The speaker’s first response to seeing the dead soldier is to “Move him into the sun,” because the sun “always” woke him throughout his life. Even though the soldier is dead, the speaker seems confident that “the kind old sun will know” a way to revive him. Yet while the sun may be powerful enough to “wake” seeds and “warm” even the surface of a distant star, it cannot resurrect the fallen soldier.

The speaker is perplexed at how something as precious and beautiful as life can always lose out to death, and puts forth a rhetorical question as a way of underlining his or her shock: “Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides / Full-nerved,

still warm, too hard to stir?" The dead body, albeit surrounded by warm sunlight, will never come back to life. The speaker then asks "Was it for this the clay grew tall?" ("clay" being a reference to the earth that human beings originally came from—an idea common in creation myths throughout the world, including the Bible), expressing incredulity that life would bother existing given that it would always lose to death.

The speaker woefully wonders in the poem's final two lines why the "fatuous," or pointless, "sunbeams" would help create life on earth in the first place, when that life would eventually die. The speaker's perspective thus widens beyond the dead soldier to include all of life. Rather than only being an elegy to a specific person (whom the poem does not even bother to name), the poem is also dedicated to mourning death's power over life—an idea magnified by the context of war.

Although it contains tinges of hope, the poem's tone ultimately comes across as mournful, doubtful, and discouraging. When situated in historical context, these tonal qualities make sense. Wilfred Owen was a British soldier during World War I, and was therefore surrounded by death. Regardless of however many sunny days occurred during the war, death likely dominated his mind, a perspective that manifests in "Futility."

Owen is angry at the wastage of life. His passionate response to the inability of the sun to rouse the soldier spills over into questioning the meaning of life itself. The fact that the sun, the giver of life and light, is incapable of bringing life back to what was once a warm, strong body makes Owen question its power. The waste of the limbs - with its obvious connection to the injuries inflicted by war - which are 'so dear achieved' (l.10) seems pointless. So the paradox of life and death is also a theme. If we look at the image of the sun as an image of God, then we see in this poem the death of Owen's beliefs.

“Futility” is an anti-war poem, powerfully evoking the pity of war with its anger and simultaneous tenderness to those who suffer.

Imagery in “Futility”:

The key image is the sun. Owen personifies the sun in the first stanza as ‘kind’, a human characteristic given to an inanimate object whose warmth brings benefit. The sun is also described as ‘old’. Whilst scientifically true, the adjective has human connotations when juxtaposed with ‘kind’, almost asking to be made into the phrase ‘kind old man’ or woman or person. Thus sun is a positive force and its action is all about bringing to life the soldier as it does the seeds. Words such as ‘Move him’, ‘gently’, ‘whispering’ and ‘rouse’ all suggest a soft, even motherly force that gently whispers rather than commands. In the final line the sun is said to know what is best for his/her children, reinforcing the image of a loving parent.

In the second stanza the sun is associated with the whole act of creation and generation. Seen almost as a divine entity (countless cultures have believed in a sun god), the sun ‘wakes’ the planet and its seeds into life and vigour. However, this sun clearly does not accord with the traditional attributes of the Christian God, who the Bible states is able to give and take life, as well as restore life after death. In a relatively short poem, there are seven references to the act of waking / getting up (l.2,4,6,8,9,11,14).

But the sun cannot do what Owen desires, cannot bring the dead to life. And so he decries its ‘fatuous sunbeams’ (l.13). It is as if the sun isn’t trying hard enough, is unfeeling and careless. Instead of symbolizing life, it comes to represent the meaninglessness of life.

Owen illustrates his poem with other images from nature. ‘The fields unsown’ (l.3) represent the man’s potential, not yet fulfilled. The ‘seeds’ which the sun wakens

represent life itself (l.8). These seeds should have grown into corn to feed life - as the soldiers ought to become the men of the future.

The harsh coldness of ‘this snow’ (l.5) can be read as a symbol of death, which came ‘this morning’, its whiteness perhaps echoing the pallor of the corpse.

In the powerful line: “Was it for this the clay grew tall?” (l.12), Owen uses ‘clay’ as an impartial metaphor for the young man’s body. In his anger Owen takes this image literally, reducing what had been a warm living body to what it has become: cold clay.

Acknowledgement (Sources taken help of):

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57283/futility-56d23aa2d4b57>

<https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/wilfred-owen/futility>

<https://poemanalysis.com/wilfred-owen/futility/>

<https://rukhaya.com/poetry-analysis-wilfred-owens-futility/>

<https://crossref-it.info/textguide/wilfred-owen-selected-poems/36/2593>

Compiled by:

*Atanu Kr Paul
Asst. Professor,
Dept. of English,
J.M.S. College, Munger*