

BAYONET CHARGE

- **Context:** this poem was written by Ted Hughes, whose father served in and survived World War One. Hughes also had two uncles who died in the Great War, and himself served in the RAF for two years.
- **“Bullets smacking the belly out of the air... a rifle numb as a smashed arm”** - the word **“smacking”** here portrays the violence of the situation and how bullets appeared to be attacking the air. The use of **“belly”** also kind of personifies the air, and this makes the violent imagery seem even more threatening, as the onomatopoeia heightens the dangerous tone of the poem and makes it seem as if the air is human (therefore making the reader feel empathetic towards the soldiers). The **“rifle”** simile suggests that it is useless, but could also mirror how the soldiers may have felt numb and slightly helpless in this war, as they were expected to suppress their emotions. The phrase **“smashed arm”** could foreshadow the injuries that soldiers were expected to receive, whilst the verb **“smashed”** creates a visceral and agnosing image in the reader’s mind.
- **“In what cold clockwork of the stars and the nations...”** - this phrase shows how the soldier is contemplating and reflecting on his role in the army, and could also suggest that Hughes is commenting on the appalling treatment of soldiers during the First World War. Additionally, the use of **“stars and nations”** makes the soldier seem and feel insignificant, as he is much smaller than both of these things. The soldier may also feel out of control, as if he is under the command of other people (perhaps those he doesn’t trust?). **“Clockwork”** may also mirror the repetitive and monotonous nature of tasks carried out in the war, whilst the consonance with **“cold”** suggests that people do not care about him as an individual.
- **“King, honour, human dignity, etcetera/Dropped like luxuries...”** - The word **“King”** here could be a direct reference to Hughes’s own disdain at men being sent to their deaths at the order of the monarchy. The paradox between **“dignity”** and **“luxuries”** also signifies that soldiers were attacking out of desperation, and had lost even their most basic human rights. This makes war seem horrific and all-consuming for the people involved. **“Etcetera”** suggests that these things - which are the reasons people often sign up to join the army - are so insignificant and unachievable, that they’re not even worth mentioning.

THEMES, FORM AND STRUCTURE

- The theme of **confusion** is prevalent throughout the poem, as not only is the soldier confused by the constant sound of gunfire, but he’s also questioning why he is there at all.
- **“He”** is used a lot, which may suggest that this experience is universal.
- The poem starts **in media res** which means “in the middle of the action”. This portrays the soldier’s situation as fast-paced and dangerous.