http://www.warpoetry.co.uk/owen2.html

ANTHEM1 FOR DOOMED YOUTH

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What passing-bells2 for these who die as cattle?

Only the monstrous anger of the guns.

Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle

Can patter out3 their hasty orisons.4

No mockeries5 now for them; no prayers nor bells;

Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs, –

The shrill, demented6 choirs of wailing shells;

And bugles7 calling for them from sad shires.8

What candles9 may be held to speed them all?

Not in the hands of boys but in their eyes

Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.

The pallor10 of girls' brows shall be their pall;

Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,

And each slow dusk11 a drawing-down of blinds.12

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September - October, 1917

Notes for students

1 Anthem  -  perhaps best known in the expression "The National Anthem;" also, an important religious song (often expressing joy); here, perhaps, a solemn song of celebration

2 passing-bells - a bell tolled after someone's death to announce the death to the world

3 patter out - rapidly speak

4 orisons  -   prayers, here funeral prayers

5 mockeries  -  ceremonies which are insults. Here Owen seems to be suggesting that the Christian religion, with its loving God, can have nothing to do with the deaths of so many thousands of men

6 demented -   raving mad

7 bugles  -  a bugle is played at military funerals (sounding the last post)

8 shires  -   English counties and countryside from which so many of the soldiers came

9 candles  -   church candles, or the candles lit in the room where a body lies in a coffin

10 pallor -   paleness

11 dusk has a symbolic significance here

12 drawing-down of blinds - normally a preparation for night, but also, here, the tradition of drawing the blinds in a room where a dead person lies, as a sign to the world and as a mark of respect. The coming of night is like the drawing down of blinds.

Anthem for Doomed Youth is one of Owen’s most famous poems. It is often read aloud at Anzac Day services and the poem seems to silence the audience. Is it the sound of the guns in the poem or the themes it explores or the images it conveys?

Anthem for Doomed Youth

http://ncowie.wordpress.com/2008/07/03/anthem-for-doomed-youth-notes/

It is a powerful poem that still has an effect on people today.

Examining the title of this poem is a way to look at the contrasts and themes which this poem explores. An anthem is usually a song of praise, but this poem, which is has the solemn style of an anthem, is about the death of the thousands of doomed youth in war. The use of the word youth in the title adds to the theme of the pity of war. The poem is written in sonnet form. The first 8 lines (the octet) lament the horror of the loss of these young men “who die as cattle”. The simile comparing the soldiers’ deaths to the slaughter of animals is one the audience can relate to. The first section poses the question of how do we most appropriately bury our war dead? The answer is in the sounds of battle. Owen’s use of alliteration and onomatopoeia in this section artfully create the sounds of battle.

The sestet (the next 6 lines) moves away from the sounds of war to the stillness of the home front, where the men are being mourned by their loved ones. These men, by the nature of war, have been left to lonely graves away from home and denied a burial service attended by their family and loved ones. This section acknowledges their grief and shows empathy for their loss.

The poem has bitterness, as it examines the brutality of war, and poignancy, as it examines the grief of the soldiers’ loved ones.

<http://www.helium.com/items/1649080-anthem-for-doomed-youth-by-wilfred-owen-poem-analysis>

As an aid to understanding fatalism in anthem for doomed youth by English World War One poet Wilfred Owen, the poem's title gives a great clue. It is also paradoxical. The word 'doomed' suggests the poems conclusion is a foregone conclusion right from the start, rather like the fate of the boy soldiers themselves. The word implies that the futures of the boys have been pre-ordained by others and that those 'others' must therefore be in a position of power.

Owen then goes on to hint at the fate that lies in store for the young soldiers in the first line of the sonnet. He uses the imagery of the abattoir in contrasting the flower of England's youth with that of cattle about to die.

On continuing to read the poem further, readers will guess that the sort of cattle Owen has in mind are not wild cattle grazing open land until they drop from old age or a natural illness, but domesticated animals - whose only 'raison d'etre' is for slaughter to provide meat for more powerful beings to enjoy.

A sad note indeed - and so it is with the boy soldiers, Owen seems to say. For the excited youthful innocence of a teenager who thinks he is entering a glorious and well-planned battle for the protection of his home country and loved ones will be used and sacrificed without the lad having any say in the matter.

The paradox in the title now becomes apparent as, although the tone of the poem is anything but rousing, Owen gives the piece the title of 'Anthem.' The use of this word is bittersweet and ironic, as an anthem usually celebrates all that is great, laudable and glorious about a country in terms of its patriotism and love of homeland.

Yet the tone of this poem is not encouraging and motivational - rather it has an air of fatalism and despondency about it, seeming to acquire a more and more grieving atmosphere as it progresses, as slowly as a hearse, towards an end bedecked with funereal images such as 'bugles' or 'candles' or 'pall'.

Responsibility for the guaranteed sacrifice of so many young lives is not pointed out with as sharp a finger in this poem by Owen as it is in others. Instead, 'others' with the power of sentencing docile trusting youth to be sacrificed on an altar of land issues are merely alluded to.

Wartime was a highly volatile period in which to risk such concepts as Fate or Cause. These ideas might have become confused (either deliberately or accidentally) with unpatriotic publicity, morale-bashing - or even worse from the government's point of view

dangerous defeatism, white-feathered cowardice or conscientious objection.

Owen, after all, was in a tricky position. While writing his poems, he was still likely to have men and boys under his command and relying upon him. He was part of the very system (the British establishment) about which he was beginning to have serious doubts. Indeed he himself, along with Rupert Brooke and Siegfried Sassoon, had left a privileged green and pleasant land with high hopes of protecting its honour and loved ones in a spirit of 'Dulce and Decorum est Pro Patria Mori.' Much of the imagery of the rural idyll of England's calm, leafy provinces is used throughout the poem.

'...sad shires... each dusk a drawing down of blinds.'

A fatalistic and sombre air is also created by the listing of some potential tributes the boy soldiers were never going to have. With each item the reader becomes more resigned to the fact that there will be more errors of omission, more needless deaths. Rather than hasty orizons, prayers, bells, choirs or candles - all the boys will have to have the ugly, monstrous, shrill or demented battle sounds as tributes instead - the word patter implying hypocrisy and superficiality.

The poem ends with a reinforcement of the relentless inevitability of the passing of Time in hours and seasons. Fate cannot be changed in the sense of the rhythm of the galaxies and planets and moons. Every day the sun will rise and fall and each new evening will bring a dusk for those who have lost loved ones...

'...each slow dusk a drawing down of blinds' brings neither news nor return. Yet unlike Time, this could be changed with the right sense of Will. The final fatalistic thought that the reader is left with, is that no one will. It would seem that, in Owen's mind, 'the powers that be' have no intention of changing anything and the relentless evening ritual of shutting the blinds every dusk reinforces the fatalistic conclusions of the poet as the poem ends.