The Shield of Achilles

SUMMARY

The goddess Thetis watched as Hephaestos made armor for her son, Achilles. Thetis expected the armor's surface to feature images of lush greenery, dignified societies, and ships navigating free, wild waters. Instead, Hephaestos forged onto the shining shield the image of a man-made wasteland and a gray, heavy sky.

This land was a totally empty, brown plain without any grass nor any sign of community. There was no food at all and no place to rest. Still, there was a hazy throng of soldiers gathered on this barren landscape. There were a ton of them, all lined up and expressionless as they waited for their orders.

The voice of some unknown figure filled the air and listed data points as justification for the soldiers going off to battle. The voice was stark and flat, as emotionless as the landscape itself. The voice didn't make anyone more excited or eager for battle, but there was no further discussion. One after the other, the soldiers filed out, kicking up dust in their wake. They held on to the reasoning behind their orders, even though this ultimately led them to despair.

Thetis kept watching Hephaestos, expecting him to forge beautiful images of religious ceremonies, with cows draped in flowers and offerings to the gods. However, in the spot where Thetis expected to see the picture of an altar on the shining shield, the light from Hephaestos's forge illuminated a very different scene.

Barbed wire surrounded a random place where bored officers lazed about. Some even made jokes, while the guards were sweating in the heat. Meanwhile, a group of average, reasonable townspeople looked on silently while three pale individuals were shackled to stakes that were then driven into the ground.

These three lives—with all their beauty and significance, all that they held dear—were equal to the lives of everyone else. However, their fate was now out of their control. They were powerless and had no hope that anyone would help them, and indeed no one did. Their captors simply did what captors do, and all that the worst among the crowd could hope for was that the victims would feel shame. The three figures were stripped of their dignity and humanity before they physically died.

Thetis kept watching as Hephaestos worked. She looked for images of athletes competing while men and women danced, swiftly swaying their beautiful bodies along to music. But in place of a dance floor, Hephaestos forged a field utterly overrun with weeds, which strangled any vegetation.

An unkempt, mischief-making boy strolled around that empty field. He tried to hit a bird with a rock, but although he aimed accurately, the bird was able to fly out of harm's way. For this young boy, it was just an accepted part of life that girls get sexually abused and that boys physically harm one another. He was unaware of any place where people actually kept their promises or were sensitive to the suffering of others.

Without saying anything, the stern metalworker Hephaestos staggered away. Thetis, whose chest shone like the shield, let out a distressed cry upon seeing what he had created for her son, Achilles. She saw that although Achilles was a strong, hardened killer, he would soon die.

THEMES

THE HORRORS OF WAR

The poem is based on a story from *The Iliad*, in which the goddess Thetis asks Hephaestos, god of blacksmiths and craftspeople, to make new armor for her son, the great Greek warrior Achilles. In the original myth, Hephaestos forges Achilles a beautifully intricate shield that places scenes of battle alongside those of everyday life and the natural world—with the implication being that war is something noble and glorious.

Auden's retelling has a very different take on war. Thetis anticipates that such magnificent imagery will adorn the shield, but instead finds a bleak landscape utterly ravaged by war (specifically, the poem implies, by World War II). Rather than glorifying war, then, the poem emphasizes the desolation and horror that it inevitably leaves in its wake.

At first, Thetis looks for the lush scenery depicted on the shield in *The Iliad*—for images of "vines and olive trees," an orderly city, the wild ocean. She then searches for athletes competing, dancers "moving … to music," and pious citizens engaged in ceremonies and celebration. In short, she anticipates that scenes of battle will appear alongside "well-governed cities"—a righteous society whose preservation and advancement justifies war.

Yet none of these scenes appear. Instead, the field that Thetis sees on the shield is a desolate "wilderness," a land "without a feature, bare and brown." The field is so barren that it cannot provide even the simplest resources necessary to sustain life; there's "nothing to eat and nowhere to sit down."

The field is also filled with a mass of blank-faced soldiers, directly connecting its devastation to the destructive power of war. That is, the poem indicates that war is to blame for the inhospitable wasteland that Thetis sees before her, because

war ravages the joys and beauty of the world. The shield—a tool of war—now reflects that truth.

These descriptions of a barren landscape are also interspersed with evidence of personal suffering, further dispelling any romantic notions of wartime heroism. For instance, the soldiers who file off to war ultimately experience "grief" as a result of their orders. They're also not moved by passion or moral conviction, but rather by dry "statistics" delivered by some distant commander—making their suffering and death seem all the more cruel and arbitrary.

The poem's final stanza then reveals that "the strong / Iron-hearted man-slaying Achilles" will also meet his death. This characterization of Achilles emphasizes that war does not spare even the most powerful and determined of soldiers. This reality pains Thetis, who "crie[s] out in dismay." The poem thus implies that violent conflict has the power to deeply wound even those who are not directly involved. Ultimately, then, the poem emphasizes that war brings about immense devastation on scales both broad and intimate. And while the stark differences between the ancient and modern shields might seem to suggest that modern warfare is more harmful than ancient conflicts, the speaker subtly implies that war has *always* been a part of human life, and that it has always been horrific.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 7-8
- Lines 9-22
- Lines 31-37
- Lines 38-44
- Line 52
- Lines 60-67

MODERN APATHY TOWARDS VIOLENCE

Although it ostensibly addresses an ancient conflict, the poem contains frequent allusions to 20th-century warfare, particularly the events of World War II. In these scenes, the figures who perpetrate and witness violence are highly apathetic—that is, they don't seem to show any concern for or response to the horrors before them. The speaker contrasts this indifference with the purpose and emotion that infuses *The Iliad*'s discussion of war. In doing so, the speaker suggests that the gradual normalization of war as a fact of life leads to complicity in violence.

The shield's depiction of modern warfare is one driven by collective resignation towards violence. For example, the second stanza describes "a million eyes, a million boots"—the mass of soldiers indicating an allusion to a world war—and thus reduces soldiers to their parts; the soldiers are not seen as individual human beings but as "an unintelligible multitude." Their lives are devalued, becoming cogs in a larger war machine—which is later contrasted against Thetis's emotional upheaval about the potential loss of her son.

Further, the soldiers wait "without expression" and accept that their impetus for killing is a matter of "statistics"—an impersonal calculation rather than an imminent threat or principled reaction to injustice. Later, the speaker says, "Barbed wire enclosed an arbitrary spot," alluding the concentration camps of the Holocaust. The word "arbitrary" denotes a lack of reason, and the officers are described as "bored" and they "lounge" around, cracking jokes while overseeing mass torture. As such, those who perpetuate modern violence are depicted as emotionally disconnected from their task.

The bystanders are also bitterly resigned. A group that watches as three people are tormented "neither moved nor spoke" and are considered "ordinary decent folk." These onlookers feel no obligation to intervene, and, tellingly, their inaction does not impact their standing as reasonable, acceptable members of society. In this way, the poem equates modern conflicts and military technology with increased apathy towards the suffering of others. Further, this indifference stems from the "ordinary" nature of modern violence—it is so prolific that human suffering is taken for granted as an inevitable fact of life.

It's possible that the poem references the original shield of Achilles to suggest that conflict was not *always* so devoid of meaning and emotion. Still, the speaker emphasizes its presence *throughout* human history, suggesting that war has always been seen as an integral facet of civilization. The poem can thus be interpreted as a warning that the gradual normalization of this reality enables mass complicity in meaningless violence.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 7-8
- Lines 12-22
- Lines 23-37
- Lines 38-44
- Lines 45-59
- Lines 62-67

THE LIMITATIONS OF ART

In *The Iliad*, Achilles's shield is an ornate work of art that depicts war as an integral part of a desirable society. It is as much a decoration as a tool, and its intricate imagery is meant to be beautiful. This poem, however, imagines what the shield would look like if its aesthetic concerns were stripped away, leaving behind candid images of war's *actual* impact. The speaker contrasts the spectacular expectations of war that the original shield creates with war's grim realities in order to question the legitimacy of art that takes war as its subject. That is, the poem seems to wonder whether any art concerned with aesthetics, with being beautiful, can fully capture the truth of something as horrific as war.

The elaborate, idealized scenes of life in wartime that fill the original shield create a romantic image of war. For instance, Thetis expects that Hephaestos will forge "ships upon untamed seas" and "athletes at their games." Appearing alongside scenes of war, these portraits of bravery and adventure promote battle as a valorous and exhilarating experience. Plus, the cities the soldiers protect are "marble" and "well-governed." Such stately descriptors dignify their task.

The original shield is also full of naturalistic beauty—lush vegetation, "white flower-garlanded heifers," and dancers "moving their sweet limbs." This visually striking and idealized backdrop for violence implicitly presents war as an important part of a utopian society. And throughout the poem, the speaker describes the captivating imagery that covers the original shield in vivid detail. In doing so, the speaker signals that the shield glorifies war by appealing to the audience's aesthetic sensibilities.

On the other hand, the speaker's modern reinterpretation of the shield is characterized by austerity and desolation. The shield's scenery is barren and "without a feature." In fact, the speaker lists all the sustenance that *isn't* present on the shield: "No blade of grass, no sign of neighborhood, / Nothing to eat and nowhere to sit down." When structures finally appear, they are no less bleak—concentration camps surrounded by barbed wire.

The figures that occupy these landscapes are similarly lifeless. They are not distinct individuals, but "an unintelligible multitude … without expression." Rather than valiant warriors engaged in battle, the modern shield features "bored officials" who lie around. The townspeople are not described as pious, active, or dignified, as they are in *The Iliad*. Instead, they are silent and motionless as they witness mass torture.

In *The Iliad*, the gleaming shield gives both Thetis and Achilles a sense of great pride and empowerment. But it turns out to be little more than a work of art, failing to protect him from death. Far truer-to-life, the modern shield more closely resembles the eye-opening documentary photography taken during World War II. As a result, Thetis is uncomfortably aware of her son's fate. The speaker thus suggests that the preconceptions of war's purpose and impacts as set by Homer are insufficient preparation for the horrific realities of war.

The speaker contrasts an artistic representation of war that prioritizes aesthetics—beauty, appearances—with a retelling that gives a more truthful account of its ugly devastation. In doing so, the speaker warns that art about war can never tell the full story, and that its glamorization of violence can lead to additional suffering. As such, the poem itself can be taken as an example of a more responsible and complete account of war, which implicitly advises the reader against taking its own portrayal as fact.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-67

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-8

She looked over ...
... sky like lead.

Before "The Shield of Achilles" even begins, its title alludes to Homer's famous Greek epic *The Iliad*. In particular, the poem references Book XVIII, in which the goddess Thetis visits the workshop of Hephaestos, god of craftspeople. Thetis asks Hephaestos to forge new armor for her son, the great warrior Achilles, who will fight on behalf of the Greeks in the Trojan War.

As the poem opens, Thetis is watching Hephaestos forge her son's shield. The poem's setting is thus implied to be Hephaestos's palace, which sits on Mount Olympus, the highest peak in Greece. Of course, none of this information is stated outright; the audience must be reasonably familiar with *The Iliad* to understand what's happening. In this way, the allusion also establishes cultural kinship between the speaker and the reader at the poem's outset.

As Thetis watches Hephaestos, she expects that he will decorate her son's shield with the sort of magnificent scenes that adorn the shield in *The Iliad*. Homer's original shield places idealized scenes of everyday life and the natural world alongside valiant battles. Accordingly, as Thetis scans the shield's surface, she searches for beauty and adventure—for rich natural imagery and "untamed" oceans. She envisions the society that Achilles defends as "marble well-governed cities," suggesting prosperity, order, integrity, and an appreciation of art.

However, what Thetis finds instead is "an artificial wilderness." Denoting something that is human-made, the "artificial" landscape is a far cry from "untamed seas." Similarly, the uncultivated "wilderness" on the shield's surface contrasts with the "vines and olive trees" that she imagines.

The shield also depicts "a sky like lead." This simile characterizes the environment as dark, heavy, and oppressive. Further, its comparison to a dull, commonplace metal diminishes the glamour implied by "shining metal." The poem thus subverts Thetis's expectations of the shield, creating a juxtaposition between Homer's portrayal of war and the speaker's modern reinterpretation.

The opening stanza is written in a modified ballad form, following a vaguely iambic (da-DUM) rhythm that generally contains three stressed beats per line (rather than alternating between three and four stresses, as is customary in ballads).

Here is a look at the meter of the first two lines:

She looked over his shoulder
For vines and olive trees,

The alternating stressed and unstressed syllables create a bouncy rhythm, producing a lighthearted atmosphere. While traditional ballads are made up of quatrains, or four-line stanzas, the first stanza of this poem contains 8 lines. Therefore, it can be seen as two ballad stanzas merged together. Its first quatrain details Thetis's expectations, while the second describes the modern shield. As such, the modified ballad form reinforces the contrast between these two scenes. The final line of this stanza, however, contains only five syllables:

And a sky like lead.

The succinctness of this line gives the final image an abrupt feel. This effect is heightened by the end-stop that concludes the line, especially given the examples of enjambment that precede it. At the end of many lines within this stanza, enjambment leaves the audience is left wondering what Thetis is looking for, and later, what she finds instead. It therefore creates anticipation, encouraging the audience to read on. Because it allows one line to flow into the next, enjambment produces an accumulation of rhythmic momentum—which then slams into that leaden sky in line 8.

Much like its bouncy rhythm, the rhymes that appear in the opening stanza create a playful mood. For example, end-stops draw attention to the rhyme between "trees" and "seas." Later, rhyme heightens the reader's awareness that a grim scene displaces this natural beauty—"lead" appears "instead." Additional sound play appears in the form of assonance and consonance. For instance, note the repeating long /oh/ sounds in the poem's first line, as well as the abundance of sibilance and /l/ sounds in this quatrain:

She looked over his shoulder
For vines and olive trees,
Marble well-governed cities
And ships upon untamed seas,

The high concentration of similar sounds creates interest and slows the reader down, drawing the audience into the poem.

LINES 9-15

A plain without ...
... for a sign.

The second stanza continues to describe the images on the shield, which depicts soldiers gathered on a barren field, awaiting orders. Opening with "a plain without a feature," this passage contains a great deal of negation, emphasizing the field's emptiness. Repetition, including anaphora, heightens this effect:

No blade of grass, no sign of neighborhood,
Nothing to eat and nowhere to sit down,

By cataloging everything that is *not* on the field, the speaker suggests that the field is insufficient. Plus, the prolific use of the negative creates a pessimistic tone. When determining the adequacy of an environment, its food, shelter, and plant life are obvious factors. However, the speaker also points out that there is "no sign of neighborhood," suggesting that community is essential to sustaining life. Its absence indicates that there is no sense of kinship amongst the soldiers who stand on the field. This desolate, arid wasteland is the antithesis of the "well-governed cities" and lush natural beauty of Homer's original shield. As such, this passage builds upon the juxtaposition between Homer's portrayal of war and the speaker's reinterpretation that was established in the opening stanza.

The troops who occupy this environment are the first figures to appear on the shield, but they are hard to discern. The speaker calls them "unintelligible"—an unconventional use of the adjective, which means indecipherable, or very difficult to understand. Its application here suggests that the mass of soldiers is hazy—that it's difficult to distinguish any individual members. "Unintelligible" might also imply that the troops' reason for assembling is unclear. In other words, the grounds on which they fight in the first place are ambiguous or debatable.

The soldiers are next described as "a million eyes, a million boots in line." This is an anachronism, as Homer's estimate of Greek forces in the Trojan War works out to about 100,000. The massive deployment of troops at one time suggests an allusion to World War II, which is confirmed by later anachronisms. By superimposing the events of World War II onto the Trojan War, the speaker implicitly draws a comparison between the two conflicts. The coming stanzas will go on to contrast contemporary attitudes towards the two wars as well as their cultural legacies. Further, because the imagery in this stanza is so bleak, the speaker's reinterpretation of shield begins to develop as a symbol of war's devastation, particularly in modern times.

Stanza 2 introduces the rhyme royal—a poetic form that appears alongside ballad stanzas throughout the poem. The rhyme royals adhere to traditional guidelines, with each stanza featuring seven lines whose end words follow an ABABBCC rhyme scheme. Further, they are written in relatively strict iambic pentameter, meaning that each line contains five iambs, a poet foot consisting of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. For example, here is a look at the first two lines of this stanza:

A plain without a feature, bare and brown,
No blade of grass, no sign of neighborhood,

The alternation between stressed and unstressed syllables creates a bouncy rhythm. Assonant long /ay/ sounds and consonant /b/ sounds appear in syllables that receive metrical stress, drawing further attention and accentuating the rhythm. Plus, end-stops punctuate nearly every line of this stanza, reinforcing its use of rhyme. The resulting lighthearted, musical atmosphere clashes with the bleak imagery, reinforcing the tension between the horrors of war and its often sanitized presentation.

LINES 16-22

Out of the ...
... else, to grief.

The poem's third stanza continues to describe the first scene that Thetis finds on the shield: a silent, ambiguous mass of soldiers is gathered on a desolate plain. The voice of an anonymous commander fills the air, reciting data and sending the soldiers off to war. This passage contains a high concentration of sibilance (on both /s/ and /z/ sounds), contributing to the eerie mood:

Out of the air a voice without a face
Proved by statistics that some cause was just
In tones as dry and level as the place:

The sibilant sounds that permeate these lines create a soft, ghostly whisper that feels hazy and distant. The disembodied voice signals a lack of personal connection between the troops and their orders. Indeed, the commander's tenor is "as dry and level as the [plain]." This simile indicates that the commander is monotonous and unmovable. The comparison also draws direct relationship between apathy and environmental decay to suggest that careless attitudes towards destructive acts lead to a barren, inhospitable world.

The troops' deployment is based on "statistics"—that is, in cold, mathematical calculations. Their motivations and goals are unclear; they fight on behalf of "some cause." The apathy of the soldiers creates another point of comparison between Homer's shield (in *The Iliad*) and the speaker's version:

- Achilles fights out of loyalty and vengeance, while *these* soldiers passively accept their orders.
- By contrast, the speaker explains that "no one was cheered and nothing was discussed." In other words, not a single soldier is heartened *nor* outraged by the commands.
- The speaker uses the negative ("nothing," "no one") to emphasize a lack of enthusiasm one way or the other. Instead, the soldiers grasp to the adopted "logic" behind their march to war.
- "Enduring," or holding onto, such thinly-substantiated beliefs in their cause ultimately leads the soldiers to misery. Further, "endure" suggests that they just tolerate, rather than embrace, the justification for war that their commanding officer provides.

Statistics was not developed as a science until the 19th century and is therefore another example of anachronism. In combination with the earlier reference to "a million eyes," the presence of statistics confirms that the speaker is alluding to a World War. Given its juxtaposition with Homer's passionate original, the new shield begins to develop symbolic significance as a representation of modern apathy towards violence.

The troops file out "column by column in a cloud of dust." The repetition within this phrase emphasizes the large mass of soldiers. The poem's meter also regains its iambic rhythm in the next lines, and in doing so mimics the soldiers' steady plod:

They marched away enduring a belief
Whose logic brought them, somewhere else, to grief.

Assonant /aw/ and consonant /l/ and /k/ sounds accentuate stressed syllables, heightening the effect. Finally, the enjambment within the above passage causes the reader's gaze to swiftly shift from the end of one line to the beginning of the next. As such, the reader scans the distinct lines in much the same way that the columns of soldiers file off, one soldier following the other.

LINES 23-30

She looked over ...
... Quite another scene.

The poem's fourth stanza repeats several structural elements of stanza one. It begins with the refrain, "She looked over his shoulder." While the previous two stanzas explore the shield's modern imagery, this opening line refocuses attention on the present moment. The repetition of the poem's very first line helps orient readers by reminding them of the physical time and place in which the poem's events take place.

Once again, Thetis watches Hephaestos as he forges the shield. However, this time she looks for pious townspeople partaking in religious ceremonies. The speaker imagines "white flower-garlanded heifers" and citizens worshipping together in harmony, surrounded by bountiful sacrifices for the gods. This luscious, idyllic scene reinforces the symbolic significance of Homer's original shield, which embodies the romanticization of war.

Moreover, this passage contains many assonant long /i/ sounds, drawing out the corresponding syllables for a lyrical feel. The assonance combines with sibilant /s/ sounds, consonant /l/ and /f/ sounds, and an internal rhyme to produce a highly musical

atmosphere:

> She looked over his shoulder
> For ritual pieties,
> White flower-garlanded heifers,
> Libation and sacrifice,
> But there on the shining metal
> Where the altar should have been,
> She saw by his flickering forge-light
> Quite another scene.

The echoing sounds blend together with ease, an example of euphony. However, consonant /r/ sounds are also present, their growl clashing with the pleasant sonic atmosphere. Here is the stanza's third line, for example:

> White flower-garlanded heifers,

The subtle aggression of the consonant /r/ sounds reflects the underlying tension within this stanza between Thetis's *perception* of war and its horrible *reality*.

As in the first stanza, Thetis's expectations of what the shield will depict are met with a "but" statement that explains what she finds in their place. This shift occurs halfway through the stanza, between its two quatrains. In this way, the poem's form encourages a comparison between Thetis's expectations of the shield's religious imagery and what it truly depicts. The structure thus reinforces the existing juxtaposition between Homer's depiction of war and the speaker's interpretation.

Interestingly, the speaker says that the scene Thetis finds is "where the altar should have been." "Should" indicates approval or correctness. The speaker might simply be adopting Thetis's perspective for a moment. Still, the conditional form subtly implies that the speaker believes that imagery that appears in the altar's place is faithless and inappropriate.

LINES 31-37

> *Barbed wire enclosed ...*
> *... in the ground.*

The poem's fifth stanza introduces the second scene that Thetis finds on the shield. Rather than idyllic religious ceremonies, its surface reflects two examples of religious persecution.

First, the speaker describes an "arbitrary spot" surrounded by barbed wire. Barbed wire was invented hundreds of years after Homer wrote the *Iliad*, so its presence in ancient Greece is another example of anachronism. Taking into account earlier allusions to World Wars, the religious undertones of the previous stanza, and historical records, it becomes clear that the speaker is likely alluding to the concentration camps erected by the Nazis during World War II. The Nazi party systematically murdered about six million Jews during the Holocaust. This act of religious persecution was fresh in the minds of Auden's contemporary readers and its history is kept alive today. Therefore, whatever the audience, this allusion carries many strong, negative connotations—trauma, cruelty, displacement, and religious bigotry to name a few.

The speaker juxtaposes the heinous violence enacted by the Nazis with their disregard for human life. In particular, SS officers lay back as they oversee mass torture. They are unbothered by the human suffering that surrounds them, even "bored" by their environment. The only thing that unnerves the guards, making them sweat, is the hot weather. One officer makes jokes, and parentheses call attention to this moment, underscoring the nonchalant and even playful attitude. The hard /k/ sounds within this phrase—"cracked a joke"—give it a particularly sharp and grating feel. Consonance also appears in this stanza's first line, where /b/ sounds accentuate metrical stresses:

> Barbed wire enclosed an arbitrary spot

By highlighting the barbed wire that surrounds the camp as well as its senseless ("arbitrary") placement, consonance emphasizes the cruelty of the scene. Similarly, this stanza contains a high concentration of /r/ sounds, creating an aggressive growling effect.

Later, a group of townspeople silently watches as three people are bound to stakes and left to die. This image alludes to the crucifixion of Christ, which is often represented by three crosses, as Jesus is said to have died between two thieves. The speaker refers to the townspeople as "ordinary decent folk," suggesting that their inaction is normal, or at least socially acceptable within their own community. The onlookers' impartiality and the speaker's cool tone contrast with the gravity of this well-known event.

The stark juxtaposition of dire injustice and extreme apathy in this stanza reinforces the modern shield's association with indifference towards violence. At the same time, the allusions create continuity, putting these historical moments in dialogue to emphasize that many forms of violence have gone unacknowledged or under-acknowledged throughout history. As such, the speaker subtly suggests that modern apathy stems from past attitudes towards violence and their preservation or manipulation in works of art.

LINES 38-44

> *The mass and ...*
> *... their bodies died.*

The poem's sixth stanza elaborates on the scene that concludes the fifth stanza, in which three figures are bound to stakes and left to die. This passage marks a brief break from the speaker's straightforward tone, as it uses uncharacteristically flowery metaphors to describe the figures' final moments. First, the

speaker explains that the figures' fate is now out of their hands:

> The mass and majesty of this world, all
> That carries weight and always weighs the same
> Lay in the hands of others; they were small

"All that carries weight" suggests something of great significance, while "of this world" likely refers to the figures' individual realities. Therefore, "the mass and majesty of this world" can be interpreted as everything that is important and beautiful to these figures. According to the speaker, the significance of an individual life "always weighs the same," suggesting equality amongst all people. As such, this metaphor emphasizes the immensity of what the figures have to lose. It also puts them on equal footing with their captors and bystanders. Further, the speaker says that the victims are "small," juxtaposing their significance with their diminished power, which is reinforced by rhyme between "all" and "small." As such, this metaphor plays up the injustice of the figures' deaths.

Later, the speaker says that "they lost their pride / And died as men before their bodies died." This metaphor casts the figures' denigration and humiliation by their captors as a death of sorts. In other words, when they are belittled and their self-determination is taken away, the figures are stripped of their humanity even before they physically perish.

This passage also contains a great deal of diacope, which emphasizes the inevitability of their deaths. For instance, here are the third and fourth lines of stanza 5:

> And could not hope for help and no help came:
> What their foes like to do was done, their shame

The repetition suggests that their fate is predetermined. Indeed, the captors, victims, and bystanders all seem aware of what's to come. Further, the reappearance of these words also hints that this sort of execution is common—it happens over and over again. While the figures are anonymous and the speaker maintains an apathetic tone, this passage acknowledges the humanity of individuals. As such, it gives the audience a closer look at the suffering that war brings about.

LINES 45-52

She looked over ...
... a weed-choked field.

In stanza 7, the speaker's focus once again shifts back to the present, in which Thetis watches Hephaestos craft the shield. When "she [looks] over his shoulder" for the final time, she seeks representations of playfulness and joy, including athletes competing "at their games" and dancers moving to music. Soft /m/, /n/, /sh/, and /s/ sounds create euphony that reinforces the pleasant scene she imagines:

> She looked over his shoulder
> For athletes at their games,
> Men and women in a dance
> Moving their sweet limbs

The reader is then met with "quick, quick, to music." The abrupt shift in rhythm mimics the percussive beat of song. Caesurae and consonant /k/ sounds ("quick" and "music") reinforce the choppy cadence. Further, the enjambment in this passage allows the rhythm to gain momentum and flow freely from one line to the next, its movement mirroring that of the dancers.

Of course, a "but" statement interrupts Thetis's upbeat, lively vision, which is replaced by a "weed-choked field." "Choked" indicates a blockage, possibly resulting in death, while weeds are unwanted pests that overtake an area of land, consuming all of its resources and killing off existing vegetation.

This landscape resonates with the featureless plain that the second half of stanza one introduces. The three stresses that land on "weed-choked field" slow the reader down, drawing out the grim image, which also lingers at the stanza's conclusion. Further, the end-stop that terminates this line ("But a weed-choked field.") comes across as particularly blunt given the enjambment that precedes it. Therefore, the reader is left with the understanding that another desolate, lifeless landscape appears on the shield's surface.

LINES 53-59

A ragged urchin, ...
... because another wept.

The poem's penultimate stanza serves as a counterpart to the playful images that Thetis envisioned in the previous stanza. More specifically, the shield depicts a young boy who wanders aimlessly, stopping to throw a stone at a bird. His sadistic game diverges sharply from the joyous dancers and graceful athletes that Thetis had hoped to see. As such, this scene reinforces the juxtaposition between Homer's original shield and the speaker's reinterpretation: while the shield in *The Iliad* depicts life coexisting in harmony with war, the modern shield shows the dangers of normalizing violence.

The boy takes it for granted that men and women—even boys and girls—are subjected to violent trauma. Because human connection and care are foreign to him, atrocity and suffering become simple facts of life ("axioms" essentially means accepted truths) in the boy's mind. Thus, the speaker implies that an absence of solidarity and compassion goes hand in hand with the passive acceptance of violence.

What's more, the poem here implies that such a perspective shapes the world that younger generations are born into, creating a self-perpetuating loop of moral decay. Indeed, the child is described as "ragged," which suggests deterioration and neglect. He is also "alone," supporting associations with neglect while indicating social isolation. As such, the boy provides

insight into what the future has in store if the normalization of violence keeps being perpetuated.

The sonic mood of this stanza contrasts with the bleak reality it describes. For instance, it contains several end-stopped lines, which call attention to end rhymes and reinforce the bouncy iambic (da-DUM) meter that pervades the poem, creating a lighthearted atmosphere. Similarly, long /ay/ sounds place additional emphasis on stressed syllables ("aimless," "vacancy," "safety," "aimed," "raped") accentuating the jaunty meter. Here's a look at this effect in the second and third lines of stanza 7:

> Flew up to safety from his well-aimed stone:
> That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third,

Moreover, consonance appears throughout the stanza, contributing to its musical feel. Notice, for example, the /f/, /l/, /s/, and /w/ sounds in "Flew up to safety from his well-aimed stone." The /w/ sound also echoes clearly throughout lines 57-59:

> Were axioms to him, who'd never heard
> Of any world where promises were kept,
> Or one could weep because another wept.

Such concentrated strings of similar sounds create a sense of harmony. The tension between this passage's musicality and its dark imagery gestures towards the overarching theme regarding the romanticization of war in works of art.

LINES 60-67

> *The thin-lipped armorer, ...*
> *... not live long.*

In the poem's final stanza, focus returns to the present, but this time, Hephaestos is done forging the shield. He walks away sternly without a word, leaving Thetis aghast at the shield's bleak imagery. This imagery leads her to the realization that war will take her son's life despite his great strength and fierce demeanor.

Sound play draws the reader into the final stanza from its very first words. For instance, consonant /th/, /t/, and /h/ sounds appear in the first three lines, where sibilant /s/ and assonant short /i/ sounds are also present:

> The thin-lipped armorer,
> Hephaestos, hobbled away,
> Thetis of the shining breasts

The remainder of the stanza shows Thetis crying out in horror at the thought of losing her child. This outpouring of emotion is an example of the empathy and emotion that the "ragged urchin" of the previous stanza has never seen. As such, it reinforces the juxtaposition of modern apathy towards violence with passionate emotional investment in ancient conflicts.

Also notice how Thetis's breasts are "shining"—the same adjective used in the previous stanzas to describe the shield, drawing a comparison between the two. In ancient Greece, women beat their chests as a sign of intense grief. Much like the shield, her breasts are expected to be a source of vitality and strength for Achilles, but they become a marker of his loss and her devastation.

The speaker refers to Achilles as "strong iron-hearted man-slaying Achilles," highlighting his ferocity and physical power. However, the closing line clarifies that he "will not live long." Therefore, the poem's conclusion suggests that war's devastation is universal, claiming even the toughest warriors. The rhyme between "strong" and "not live long" further emphasizes this message. Plus, consonant /n/ sounds pervade the stanza, accentuating "not" in its final line. The clear alliteration of "live long" draws additional attention to Achilles's imminent death. Moreover, three stresses in a row land on "not live long," again underscoring the inevitable downfall of Achilles:

> Who would not live long.

The poem's last independent clause stretches across six lines, creating five examples of enjambment in a row. This allows the rhythm to gain momentum, driving towards the poem's conclusion. Plus, the end-stop that terminates the poem comes across as particularly final and authoritative given the preceding enjambment. Therefore, the reader is left with a vivid, memorable image of Achilles's death—and by extension, the devastating power of war.

SYMBOLS

THE ORIGINAL SHIELD

The shield of Achilles as it is originally portrayed in Homer's *Iliad* is not physically present in this poem. However, it looms as a symbolic counterpart of the speaker's modern reinterpretation of the shield.

Thetis lists features of Homer's shield, which she describes as dense with images of adventure, natural beauty, and a pious, orderly society. These idealized scenes of everyday life are interspersed with those of glorious battles. The original shield thus comes to embody ancient attitudes about war—namely that it is a necessary part of an honorable civilization.

However, this shield is absent and has been replaced with a modern model that plainly documents the horrifying impacts of war. In this context, the original shield also represents the *danger* of glorifying war, particularly in works of art. Indeed,

despite the shield's beauty, it can't save Achilles from death.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-4:** "vines and olive trees, / Marble well-governed cities / And ships upon untamed seas"
- **Lines 24-26:** "ritual pieties, / White flower-garlanded heifers, / Libation and sacrifice"
- **Line 28:** "the altar"
- **Lines 46-49:** "athletes at their games, / Men and women in a dance / Moving their sweet limbs / Quick, quick, to music"
- **Line 51:** "dancing-floor"

THE MODERN SHIELD

In contrast to Homer's original, the modern shield of Achilles pictures lifeless plains, apathetic bystanders, and violence perpetuated without motive. In other words, its portrayal of war centers death and moral degeneration. As a counterpart of Homer's original shield, which represents the (perceived) role of war in classical Greece, the modern version represents the grim realities of war. Furthermore, hallmarks of 20th-century warfare—"barbed wire," "statistics," "a million boots,"—decorate the modern shield. Therefore, it highlights the horrors of *modern* warfare in particular.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 7-8
- Lines 9-22
- Lines 31-44
- Lines 52-59
- Line 64

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

The poem's title and events are derived from *The Iliad*, an ancient Greek epic attributed to Homer. The *Iliad* follows the finest Greek warrior, Achilles, during the Trojan War. This poem's title indicates an allusion to Book XVIII in particular. Achilles's mother, the goddess Thetis, visits the palace of Hephaestos, god of craftspeople, and asks him to forge new armor for her son. He agrees, crafting an ornate, gleaming shield that depicts the heavens, the natural world, and picturesque representations of everyday life in Greece alongside romanticized battle scenes.

Like *The Iliad*, "The Shield of Achilles" begins *in media res*—the reader is thrust into a dramatic narrative with little contextualization. The speaker uses the vague pronouns "he" and "she" when referring to Hephaestos and Thetis, only confirming their identities in the final stanza. It is therefore crucial that the audience recognize the poem's overarching allusion to understand what is taking place.

In addition to creating a sense of cultural kinship between the speaker and the reader, this "barrier to entry" ensures that the poem's audience will pick up on its thematic meaning. In other words, if a reader is able to identify Thetis and Hephaestos, they understand that the epic is infused with passion, beauty, adventure, and grandeur. Therefore, the allusion to such a well-known and elaborate example of war's romanticization serves as a stark foil for the speaker's portrayal of war as bleak and destructive.

Furthermore, the allusion places this poem within a wider literary tradition of reinterpreting ancient stories and applying their themes and styles to later events. As such, it allows the reader to question whether *The Iliad* and other epics are suitable models for discussing modern wars.

The speaker also alludes to World War II through various anachronisms. World War II was fresh in the minds of Auden's contemporary audience and its impacts are felt and studied today. It is known as the largest and deadliest war in history. The Holocaust casts a particularly dark shadow over this point in history. The Nazi party's systematic murder of millions of Jews and other minority groups stunned and horrified the world. The speaker's allusions specifically point to the "millions" of lives impacted by the war, as well as the concentration camps and other imprisonments erected by the Nazis all over Europe (infamously enclosed by barbed wire, which is mentioned in line 31). By alluding to such a tragic, cruel, and far-reaching conflict, the speaker is able to appeal to the emotions and experiences of a wide audience.

Finally, the crucifixion of Christ is commonly represented by three crosses—one for Jesus and the others for two thieves alongside whom he was hung. The "three pale figures … bound / To three posts" in the poem's fifth stanza therefore likely allude to the Bible. The casual tone of this scene and the disregard of its onlookers is shocking, given that this story of martyrdom is retold and studied all over the world today. As such, this allusion deepens the existing juxtaposition between violence and apathy, suggesting that such indifference is inappropriate. Moreover, the allusion highlights that individual victims become anonymized in times of war—reduced to "statistics." Finally, the biblical allusion creates subtle (Christian) religious undertones. Within the poem, a lack of faith is coupled with moral failings, perhaps suggesting that religion has the power to correct the ethical degeneration of society.

The speaker alludes to very well-known instances of violence, preventing the poem's message from becoming too obscured. All of the above allusions reference different locations and time periods, demonstrating that violent conflict has always been part of human civilization. Their commingling also invites the reader to compare the events of these conflicts, as well as their

artistic portrayal and contemporary attitudes towards them.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8
- Line 14
- Lines 23-30
- Lines 31-37
- Lines 38-49
- Lines 60-67

ANACHRONISM

The speaker's description of the shield contains several anachronisms, which, taken together, allude to World War II. First, the speaker describes troops standing on a field as "a million eyes, a million boots in line." Such a substantial mass of soldiers is inconsistent with accounts of the Trojan War. Homer's own estimation works out to about 100,000 men fighting on behalf of the Greeks.

Further, they fight on the grounds of "statistics," which was not developed as a formal scientific practice until the 19th century. Later, the speaker tells of an imprisonment surrounded by barbed wire, invented centuries after Homer was writing. This image recalls the concentration camps erected by the Nazis during the Holocaust. Each was controlled by numerous guards and officers, which the speaker also references.

The precise implications of these allusions to World War II are explored in more detail above. Generally speaking, they suggest that the speaker is thematically concerned with the impact of modern military conflicts and attitudes towards war. Plus, by superimposing more recent events onto an ancient (mythological) war, the speaker sets up a comparison between them. As such, anachronisms contribute to the juxtaposition between the ancient and modern shield. At the same time, they create continuity, reminding the reader that war has always been a part of human civilization.

Where Anachronism appears in the poem:

- **Line 14:** "A million eyes, a million boots in line"
- **Line 17:** "statistics"
- **Lines 31-33:** "Barbed wire enclosed an arbitrary spot /
  Where bored officials lounged (one cracked a joke) /
  And sentries sweated"

ASSONANCE

Assonance appears throughout the poem, creating sonic interest that keeps its audience engaged. Dense clusters of repeating vowel sounds draw attention and sometimes require rereading, slowing the reader down. For instance, /aw/ sounds pervade the poem's final lines:

> At what the god had wrought
> To please her son, the strong
> Iron-hearted man-slaying Achilles
> Who would not live long.

Furthermore, the assonant sounds appear within stressed syllables, exaggerating the meter to ensure a forceful, memorable ending. Because assonance tends to elongate words and produce gratifying sound play, it often clashes with this poem's dark imagery. In stanza 6, long /ay/ sounds contribute to the lyricism of a flowery metaphor:

> That carries weight and always weighs the same
> Lay in the hands of others; they were small

Here, the speaker describes the crucifixion of three figures, who have so much to lose and such little power. Assonant long /ay/ sounds reappear in stanza 8, where an "aimless" boy wanders around a "vacancy," taking for granted "that girls are raped." Both excerpts pair pleasant sonic harmony with indifference towards violent human suffering. As such, the assonance reinforces existing juxtapositions between the horrors of war and the carefree attitudes of both soldiers and civilians.

In a few places, short vowel sounds create a choppy rhythm, in contrast to the relaxed flow of the above examples. For instance, the speaker tells of dancers who move their "limbs / Quick, quick, to music." The assonant short /i/ sounds result in a disjointed cadence, especially in combination with the line break and caesurae. The percussive pulse of these lines resembles a beat, mimicking the music they describe. As such, assonance also shifts the poem's rhythm to create more vivid images.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "over," "shoulder"
- **Line 4:** "upon," "untamed"
- **Line 8:** "sky like"
- **Line 9:** "plain"
- **Line 10:** "blade," "neighborhood"
- **Line 12:** "congregated," "blankness"
- **Line 13:** "unintelligible," "multitude"
- **Line 19:** "discussed"
- **Line 20:** "Column," "column," "dust"
- **Line 23:** "over," "shoulder"
- **Line 24:** "pieties"
- **Line 25:** "White"
- **Line 26:** "Libation," "sacrifice"
- **Line 27:** "shining"
- **Line 29:** "light"
- **Line 30:** "Quite"
- **Line 39:** "weight," "always weighs," "same"
- **Line 40:** "Lay"

- **Line 43:** "pride"
- **Line 44:** "died," "died"
- **Line 45:** "over," "shoulder"
- **Line 48:** "limbs"
- **Line 49:** "Quick," "quick," "music"
- **Line 53:** "aimless"
- **Line 54:** "vacancy"
- **Line 55:** "safety," "aimed"
- **Line 56:** "raped"
- **Line 64:** "god," "wrought"
- **Line 65:** "strong"
- **Line 67:** "not," "long"

CONSONANCE

This poem features an abundance of consonance, some striking examples of which we've highlighted here. Typically, repeating consonant sounds add emphasis to corresponding words and phrases. But here, consonance is *so* dense that this effect is rare. Instead, it mostly functions to hold the reader's attention and shape the poem's mood. For example, many /r/ sounds appear in stanza 5, which contains the first descriptions of figures inflicting violence:

> Barbed wire enclosed an arbitrary spot ...
> ... neither moved nor spoke
> As three pale figures were led forth and bound
> To three posts driven upright in the ground.

The consonant /r/ sounds produce a growling effect that gives this scene an aggressive atmosphere, playing up the cruelty of the soldiers and bystanders. This is aided by consonance of the /b/ and /k/ sounds above as well.

The first three ballad stanzas (stanzas 1, 4, and 7) each contain the phrases "She looked over his shoulder" and "But there on the shining ..." Because consonance is so prevalent in the poem, many of the sounds within these phrases—most often /l/, /s/, /r/, /n/, and /d/—appear elsewhere in these stanzas. As a result, they take on a similar sonic identity. The ballad stanzas take place in the present and, as such, the consonance within these ballad stanzas subtly reinforces a shift back to the present, grounding the reader.

The harmony amongst echoing sounds frequently feels incongruous with the poem's graphic subject. By creating a lighthearted mood, consonance heightens concurrent juxtapositions between the horrible devastation of war and the emotionless figures on the shield. The sound play also contributes to the speaker's untroubled tone, which emphasizes the inappropriateness of apathy in the face of human suffering.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "She," "over," "shoulder"
- **Line 2:** "vines," "olive"
- **Line 3:** "Marble well-governed cities"
- **Line 4:** "ships," "seas"
- **Line 5:** "shining"
- **Line 6:** "His hands had," "instead"
- **Line 7:** "artificial," "wilderness"
- **Line 8:** "sky like lead"
- **Line 9:** "bare," "brown"
- **Line 10:** "No," "blade," "no sign," "neighborhood"
- **Line 11:** "Nothing," "nowhere," "down"
- **Line 12:** "congregated," "blankness"
- **Line 13:** "unintelligible multitude"
- **Line 14:** "million," "million," "line"
- **Line 15:** "Without," "waiting"
- **Line 16:** "voice," "face"
- **Line 17:** "statistics," "some cause," "just"
- **Line 18:** "place"
- **Line 19:** "No one," "and nothing," "discussed"
- **Line 20:** "Column," "column," "cloud," "dust"
- **Line 23:** "She," "shoulder"
- **Line 24:** "ritual"
- **Line 25:** "flower-garlanded," "heifers"
- **Line 26:** "Libation," "sacrifice"
- **Line 27:** "shining"
- **Line 28:** "should"
- **Line 29:** "She," "flickering," "forge"
- **Line 31:** "Barbed wire," "enclosed," "arbitrary"
- **Line 32:** "Where bored," "cracked," "joke"
- **Line 33:** "sentries sweated"
- **Line 34:** "crowd," "ordinary decent folk"
- **Line 35:** "Watched," "without," "spoke"
- **Line 36:** "pale"
- **Line 37:** "posts," "upright"
- **Line 38:** "mass," "majesty," "world"
- **Line 39:** "weight," "always weighs"
- **Line 40:** "others," "they"
- **Line 41:** "hope," "help," "help"
- **Line 42:** "do," "done"
- **Line 43:** "Was," "worst," "wish," "pride"
- **Line 44:** "And," "died," "before," "bodies," "died"
- **Line 45:** "She," "shoulder"
- **Line 47:** "Men," "women"
- **Line 48:** "Moving," "limbs"
- **Line 49:** "Quick," "quick," "music"
- **Line 50:** "shining shield"
- **Line 51:** " His hands had"
- **Line 53:** "aimless," "alone"
- **Line 54:** "Loitered"
- **Line 55:** "Flew," "safety"
- **Line 58:** "world where," "were"

- **Line 59:** "weep," "wept"
- **Line 61:** "Hephaestos," "hobbled"
- **Line 67:** "live long"

END-STOPPED LINE

About half of the poem's lines are end-stopped. Each stanza consists of one long, complex sentence. The end-stops therefore provide necessary structure, orienting the audience and facilitating a smooth reading of the poem. Furthermore, within the poem's ballad stanzas (1, 4, and 7), a "but" statement separates Thetis's expectations of the shield from the images Hephaestos actually forges. An end-stop divides the two images, creating a clear juxtaposition.

The neat, orderly lines that result from frequent end-stops give the speaker's narration a direct and authoritative air. Stanza 2 is a good example of this effect. Here's a look at its last few lines:

> An unintelligible multitude,
> A million eyes, a million boots in line,
> Without expression, waiting for a sign.

The speaker describes seemingly identical columns of soldiers, lined up one after the other. The end-stops complement the speaker's emotionless observational tone. At the same time, they produce distinct, organized lines on the page, mirroring the troops on the field. However, the speaker's detachment from the poem's events and the tidy, self-contained lines conflict with the violence and chaos of war. Moreover, end punctuation calls attention to end rhymes, which produce a carefree, song-like sonic harmony. As such, end-stops reinforce the tension between horror and apathy that runs throughout the poem.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "trees,"
- **Line 4:** "seas,"
- **Line 8:** "lead."
- **Line 9:** "brown,"
- **Line 10:** "neighborhood,"
- **Line 11:** "down,"
- **Line 13:** "multitude,"
- **Line 14:** "line,"
- **Line 15:** "sign."
- **Line 18:** "place:"
- **Line 19:** "discussed;"
- **Line 22:** "grief."
- **Line 24:** "pieties,"
- **Line 25:** "heifers,"
- **Line 26:** "sacrifice,"
- **Line 28:** "been,"
- **Line 30:** "scene."
- **Line 32:** "joke)"
- **Line 33:** "hot:"
- **Line 37:** "ground."
- **Line 41:** "came:"
- **Line 44:** "died."
- **Line 46:** "games,"
- **Line 49:** "music,"
- **Line 52:** "field."
- **Line 53:** "alone,"
- **Line 55:** "stone:"
- **Line 56:** "third,"
- **Line 58:** "kept,"
- **Line 59:** "wept."
- **Line 60:** "armorer,"
- **Line 61:** "away,"
- **Line 67:** "long."

ENJAMBMENT

Within this poem, enjambment primarily functions to create suspense. The enjambments that occur after the refrains "she looked over his shoulder" and "but there on the ... metal" are a strong example of this effect. Here, Thetis eagerly searches for something, but the audience must read on to discover what exactly she seeks. Next, the speaker explains that her wishes are not met, creating multi-line "but" phrases that build anticipation as the audience waits to learn what she finds instead.

In a few places within the poem, enjambment occurs shortly after a caesura, calling particular attention to the word or phrase that hangs between the punctuation and line break. Here is a look at a passage from stanza 6:

> The mass and majesty of this world, all
> That carries weight and always weighs the same
> Lay in the hands of others; they were small

In this example, caesura and enjambment isolate the word "all," highlighting the immensity of what the captives have to lose. Shortly thereafter, the same two devices underscore the figures' lack of power over their fate. The enjambment also plays up the end rhyme between these two lines, further linking the significance of the victims' lives with their vulnerability. As such, enjambment heightens the audience's perception of this scene's injustice.

Elsewhere, enjambment briefly creates movement to mimic the actions of the figures being described. For instance, the conclusion to stanza 3 reads:

> Column by column in a cloud of dust

They marched away enduring a belief
Whose logic brought them, somewhere else, to grief.

The abrupt line breaks create distinct columns on the page that resemble the orderly troops on the field. As the reader traces these lines, their form quickly repeats, one following the other. As such, the enjambment creates rapid, recurrent movements that mirror filing soldiers. In a more lighthearted application of this technique, the poem's seventh stanza contains the following description:

Men and women in a dance
Moving their sweet limbs
Quick, quick, to music,

Here, enjambment causes the reader's gaze to swiftly shift from the end of one line to the beginning of the next, turning around like lively dancers. In both cases, enjambment allows the readers to subtly enact the motions described in the text, creating layered, impactful images.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "shoulder / For"
- **Lines 3-4:** "cities / And"
- **Lines 5-6:** "metal / His"
- **Lines 7-8:** "wilderness / And"
- **Lines 12-13:** "stood / An"
- **Lines 16-17:** "face / Proved"
- **Lines 17-18:** "just / In"
- **Lines 20-21:** "dust / They"
- **Lines 21-22:** "belief / Whose"
- **Lines 23-24:** "shoulder / For"
- **Lines 27-28:** "metal / Where"
- **Lines 29-30:** "forge-light / Quite"
- **Lines 31-32:** "spot / Where"
- **Lines 34-35:** "folk / Watched"
- **Lines 35-36:** "spoke / As"
- **Lines 36-37:** "bound / To"
- **Lines 38-39:** "all / That"
- **Lines 39-40:** "same / Lay"
- **Lines 40-41:** "small / And"
- **Lines 42-43:** "shame / Was"
- **Lines 43-44:** "pride / And"
- **Lines 45-46:** "shoulder / For"
- **Lines 47-48:** "dance / Moving"
- **Lines 48-49:** "limbs / Quick"
- **Lines 50-51:** "shield / His"
- **Lines 51-52:** "dancing-floor / But"
- **Lines 54-55:** "bird / Flew"
- **Lines 57-58:** "heard / Of"
- **Lines 62-63:** "breasts / Cried"
- **Lines 63-64:** "dismay / At"
- **Lines 64-65:** "wrought / To"
- **Lines 65-66:** "strong / Iron-hearted"
- **Lines 66-67:** "Achilles / Who"

JUXTAPOSITION

There are two overarching juxtapositions within the poem, and they are central to understanding its themes. First, Thetis's grand expectations of the shield are set next to the bleak scenes that Hephaestos forges. Second, the horrible devastation brought on by war is met with apathy.

From the poem's opening line, the speaker sets up a contrast between the shield as it is presented in *The Iliad* and the modern interpretation described here. The first four lines show Thetis searching for lush greenery and stormy seas. However, the atmosphere shifts when the speaker inserts a "but" statement that reveals the dull, heavy sky that she finds "instead." This interjection comes halfway through the opening stanza, creating a clear divide between Thetis's expectations and reality. The mirrored structure further encourages a comparison between them. Further, the speaker replaces magnificent images of the natural world with a dreary landscape.

The stanzas that follow expand on this imagery, and the pattern is repeated. Stanza 4 describes reverent townspeople performing spiritual ceremonies, who are replaced by scenes of religious persecution. Then, in stanza 7, Thetis looks for figures playing together lightheartedly. But what she finds is a boy throwing stones at a bird. The constant juxtaposition of the ancient and modern shields exposes the gulf between glorious expectations of war and its grim realities. When the speaker strips away the imagery of Homer's shield (from *The Iliad*), Thetis finds only devastation. As such, the speaker suggests that the romanticization of war—particularly in works of art—obscures its catastrophic consequences.

Within descriptions of the modern shield, the speaker juxtaposes wartime devastation and human apathy. For instance, stanza 5 describes Nazi officers laying back and making jokes as they inflict mass trauma. Meanwhile, three people are shackled to posts and die as a crowd looks on. The speaker plays up the injustice of the scene by reminding the audience that the lives of the three figures are just as important and meaningful as those of everyone else. Still, the bystanders are called "ordinary decent folk." The speaker's own detached tone clashes with the horror of the scene.

Later, the young boy who stones a bird accepts "that girls are raped, that two boys knife a third" because he has never witnessed human solidarity. Such juxtapositions draw a direct line from indifference in the face of violence to meaningless, unjust suffering. Moreover, in both of the above examples, resignation stems from the ordinariness of tragedy. Because

the apathy of the images on the modern shield is contrasted with the beauty and passion of Homer's original, the speaker implies that societies have become increasingly desensitized to mass suffering.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-22
- Lines 23-37
- Lines 38-44
- Lines 45-59

METAPHOR

"The Shield of Achilles" contains a few brief metaphors in the sixth stanza that help readers visualize and interpret the poem's events. This stanza describes three figures who are tied to posts and left to die. The elaborate, convoluted phrasing distinguishes this stanza from the rest of the poem. Here is a look at the first few lines:

> The mass and majesty of this world, all
> That carries weight and always weighs the same
> Lay in the hands of others; they were small

In this passage, the speaker points out the captives' lack of power. The beauty and significance of their lives is represented by "the mass and majesty of this world." The speaker reminds the audience that all lives are equal or "always weigh the same." But the fate of each captive's entire reality is now out of their hands. In this way, they are "small," or powerless. The metaphorical language expresses the immensity of what the victims stand to lose as well as the diminishment of their rights.

The speaker goes on to explain that no one comes to the captives' aid and their fate is sealed. Ultimately, they "died as men before their bodies died." This metaphor indicates that the three figures are dishonored and dehumanized in the moments leading up to their death. Even as it illustrates moral failing and the inevitability of suffering, the figurative language within this stanza briefly acknowledges the tragedy of the poem's events. As such, these metaphors draw the audience into a difficult scene and invite an emotional response.

A final metaphor appears with the description of "Iron-hearted" Achilles, which simply means that his heart is hardened like metal—that he is used to killing, unfazed by the demands of war.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 38-40:** "The mass and majesty of this world, all / That carries weight and always weighs the same / Lay in the hands of others; they were small"
- **Line 44:** "died as men before their bodies died"
- **Line 66:** "Iron-hearted"

REPETITION

"The Shield of Achilles" contains several forms of repetition. Stanzas 1, 4, and 7 all open with "She looked over his shoulder / For." This refrain describes Thetis watching Hephaestos as he forges the shield. In each stanza, she anticipates a different genre of magnificent imagery—namely natural beauty, religious devotion, and joyful play. However, her expectations are always met with a second refrain ("But there on the ... metal") that introduces what she finds in their place.

This format gives the poem structure, creating several points of comparison between the original shield and the speaker's reinterpretation. As such, this use of repetition underscores juxtaposition. Because the refrains indicate a return to the present moment, they also ground the reader after lengthy descriptions of the shield. Plus, Thetis continues to expect that Haephestos will emblazon the shield with romantic scenes even after she is proved wrong twice. Repetition thus emphasizes her incredulity over its bleak images, revealing that ancient Greek representations of war are deeply-rooted aesthetics and idealization.

Stanza 2 details the barren plain that Thetis finds in place of sprawling greenery and stormy waters:

> **No** blade of grass, **no** sign of neighborhood,
> **Nothing** to eat and **nowhere** to sit down,

The speaker uses repetition, including anaphora, to list all the lush vegetation that is *not* present on the field. The string of negatives plays up its desolation and lifelessness, creating a vivid first impression of the environment depicted on the modern shield.

Anaphora reappears later in this stanza when the speaker refers to soldiers as "**a million** eyes, **a million** boots in line." Here, repetition underscores the large mass of the troops. Furthermore, the soldiers are dehumanized—reduced to their parts, as if they are all identical. Repetition reinforces the idea that the soldiers are viewed as interchangeable. A similar effect occurs in the following stanza, where the troops file out "**column** by **column**." In this case, repetition also accentuates a strong iambic rhythm that mimics the soldiers' steady plod.

Stanza 6 contains the next several instances of repetition, which are examples of diacope:

> The mass and majesty of this world, all
> That carries **weight** and always **weighs** the same
> Lay in the hands of others; they were small
> And could not hope for **help** and no **help** came:
> What their foes like to **do** was **done**, their shame

Was all the worst could wish; they lost their pride
And died as men before their bodies died.

This passage describes three figures who are tied to stakes and left for dead. The repetition of similar words reflects the inevitability that pervades this stanza—the victims knew no one would help them and their fate is sealed once their captors have their way. Furthermore, the repetition suggests that the three figures' death is not a rare occurrence but happens en masse. It is something the bystanders, torturers, and victims have come to expect.

Finally, stanza 7 features dancers who move "quick, quick, to music." Punctuated with commas, this example of epizeuxis produces a fast-paced, insistent, and choppy rhythm that imitates the music it describes. Therefore, the speaker uses repetition to various effects throughout the poem, all of which create a clearer picture of the poem's events and their implications.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "She looked over his shoulder / For"
- **Line 5:** " But there on the shining metal"
- **Line 6:** "His hands had"
- **Line 10:** "No," "no"
- **Line 11:** "Nothing," "nowhere"
- **Line 14:** "A million eyes, a million boots"
- **Line 20:** "Column," "column"
- **Lines 23-24:** "She looked over his shoulder / For"
- **Line 27:** "But there on the shining metal"
- **Line 39:** "weight," "weighs"
- **Line 41:** "help," "help"
- **Line 42:** "do," "done"
- **Line 44:** "died," "died"
- **Line 49:** "Quick, quick,"
- **Line 59:** "weep," "wept"
- **Line 62:** " Thetis of the shining breasts"

ALLITERATION

As noted in our discussions of assonance and consonance, the poem is filled with repeating sounds that, overall, make it sound extremely musical and at times even euphonic. The beauty of the poem is often at deliberate odds with the darkness of its subject.

Alliteration adds to this effect. Because it's such a striking device, with shared sounds right there at the front of nearby words, it also draws particular attention to the poem's imagery. Take alliterative phrases like "bare and brown," "shining shield," "flickering forge-light," and "sentries sweated," each of which help bring the images on the shield to life.

Alliteration can reflect the poem's content as well. In the second stanza, alliteration of the /n/ sound underscores the lines' intense negation. That is, these lines are all about what this barren field lacks, and the return to the /n/ sound again and again (via consonance as well) hammers home that sense of absence:

No blade of grass, no sign of neighborhood,
Nothing to eat and nowhere to sit down,

Perhaps the most memorable moment of alliteration is that which comes at the very end of the poem. The final two words, "live long," ring out all the more clearly and strikingly to the reader thanks to their shared sound. Alliteration helps the image of Achilles's eventual death linger after the poem ends.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "She," "shoulder"
- **Line 4:** "ships"
- **Line 5:** "shining"
- **Line 6:** "His hands had"
- **Line 8:** "like lead"
- **Line 9:** "bare," "brown"
- **Line 10:** "No," "blade," "no," "neighborhood"
- **Line 11:** "Nothing," "nowhere"
- **Line 13:** "multitude"
- **Line 14:** "million," "million"
- **Line 15:** "Without," "waiting"
- **Line 20:** "Column," "column," "cloud"
- **Line 23:** "She," "shoulder"
- **Line 27:** "shining"
- **Line 28:** "should"
- **Line 29:** "She," "flickering forge"
- **Line 31:** "Barbed"
- **Line 32:** "bored"
- **Line 33:** "sentries sweated"
- **Line 35:** "Watched," "without"
- **Line 36:** "pale"
- **Line 37:** "posts"
- **Line 38:** "mass," "majesty," "world"
- **Line 39:** "weight," "weighs"
- **Line 41:** "hope," "help," "help"
- **Line 42:** "do," "done"
- **Line 43:** "Was," "worst," "wish"
- **Line 44:** "before," "bodies"
- **Line 45:** "She," "shoulder"
- **Line 50:** "shining shield"
- **Line 51:** "His hands had"
- **Line 58:** "world where," "were"
- **Line 59:** "weep," "wept"
- **Line 61:** "Hephaestos," "hobbled"
- **Line 65:** "son," "strong"
- **Line 67:** "live long"

SIMILE

In the opening stanza, a simile compares the sky within the modern shield's landscape to lead. This initial description of its scenery suggests a dark, heavy, and oppressive atmosphere that sharply diverges from the lush natural world depicted on Homer's original. Moreover, by referencing a dull, lower-grade metal, the speaker undermines the glamour suggested by "the shining metal" earlier. The image of a leaden sky recalls pollution created by industrialism, especially as it is coupled with "an artificial wilderness." Therefore, the simile suggests that war and its modern mechanization destroy the environment, leaving desolation in their wake.

There is another similar in stanza 3, when a military officer sends troops off to war on the basis of "statistics." The officer speaks "in tones as dry and level as the [bare plain]" on which the soldiers stand. As such, the first individual pictured on the shield ironically adds no vitality to the lifeless scene, instead *reinforcing* its barrenness. "Dry" implies dehydration, an inability to sustain life, and boredom. Meanwhile, "level" evokes monotony. In short, the simile characterizes the tenor of the official's speech as impersonal and emotionally detached. Furthermore, by comparing the commanding officer's cold tone to the stark landscape, the simile suggests that environmental destruction is a result of human apathy. In other words, carelessness about causing ruin leads to a desolate, joyless, and uninhabitable world.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "And a sky like lead."
- **Line 18:** "In tones as dry and level as the place:"

VOCABULARY

She looked over his shoulder (Line 1, Line 23, Line 45) - This is an allusion to Book XVIII of *The Iliad*, an ancient Greek epic poem attributed to Homer. The goddess Thetis visits the palace of Hephaestos, god of metalworking, and tells him about the struggles of her son, Achilles. Achilles had refused to fight in the Trojan War due to a disagreement with the commander of the Greek forces. Achilles's dear companion, Patroclus, took up his armor and fought in his place. But Patroclus was killed in battle and the armor was stolen. Overcome with grief and rage, Achilles has vowed to avenge his death. Hephaestos agrees to forge new armor for Thetis, who watches as he emblazons a spectacular shield. In *The Iliad*, the shield is dense with magnificent, idealized scenes of war and everyday life. In this poem, the speaker reimagines what the shield might look like if it plainly reflected the impacts of modern conflicts, particularly World War II.

Unintelligible (Line 13) - Incomprehensible; incapable of being understood. The speaker indicates that the mass of soldiers is indistinct and difficult to make out. The unconventional use of this descriptor subtly implies that the reasoning behind the soldiers' deployment is unclear.

Multitude (Line 13) - Here this means a crowd of people.

Enduring (Line 21) - To endure something is to suffer through it over a period of time. When used as an adjective, enduring means long-lasting. The speaker thus suggests that the soldiers hold on to the belief that their reason for fighting is just, and they suffer through the consequences of adhering to this belief (i.e., going to war).

Pieties (Line 24) - Actions inspired by religious devotion.

Libation (Line 26) - The ritual of pouring out a drink as a sacrifice to a deity. In ancient Greece, libations were widely practiced as part of everyday life.

Forge-light (Line 29) - The light given off by a forge—a hearth used to heat up metals so that they might be manipulated.

Abitrary (Line 31) - Selected at random or on the basis of personal whim—not a result of sound reasoning. Arbitrary can also describe an autocratic ruler who acts with complete and unrestrained power. In this line, the speaker references the concentration camps erected by the Nazis during the Holocaust, suggesting that their establishment is baseless and tyrannical.

Sentries (Line 33) - Soldiers who act as guards.

Urchin (Line 53) - A young child who is mischievous and disheveled.

Loitered (Line 54) - Leisurely and aimlessly hung around.

Axioms (Line 57) - An assertion or idea that is generally accepted as intrinsically true.

Thin-lipped (Line 60) - Another way of saying tight-lipped, meaning reserved or unwilling to comment on a given situation.

Armorer (Line 60) - Someone who makes weaponry and/or armor.

Hephaestos (Line 61) - In Greek mythology, Hephaestos is the god of fire, volcanoes, blacksmiths, metalworking, sculptors, and general craftspeople. He is said to have made all of the weapons—as well as other fine goods, such as palaces and jewelry—for the Gods on Mount Olympus. In *The Iliad*, the goddess Thetis therefore seeks out the master craftsman to forge armor for her son.

Thetis (Line 62) - In Greek mythology, Thetis is a sea goddess whom both Zeus and Poseidon courted. However, it was prophesied that she would bear a son whose glory would exceed that of his father. She was therefore married off to a mortal king named Peleus, who fathered her son, the great warrior and demigod Achilles. In *The Iliad*, Thetis visits Hephaestos to acquire armor to protect Achilles during the Trojan War.

Wrought (Line 64) - Made or crafted; an outdated past-tense form of "work."

Iron-hearted (Line 66) - Cruel or unfeeling, as if one's heart is made of iron.

Achilles (Line 66) - In Greek mythology, Achilles is demigod considered the greatest Greek warrior. He is the protagonist of Homer's *Iliad*, which is set during the Trojan War. As the story goes, Achilles is on a mission to avenge the murder of his dear companion, Patroclus, who died in battle wearing Achilles's armor. As a result, his mother, Thetis, asks Hephaestos to make Achilles new armor that might protect him in battle.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

This poem employs two traditional poetic forms that alternate thrghout its nine stanzas: the ballad and rhyme royal. From stanza to stanza, the speaker switches between them in the following pattern:

- Ballad
- Rhyme royal
- Rhyme royal
- Ballad
- Rhyme royal
- Rhyme royal
- Ballad
- Rhyme royal
- Ballad

The ballad form is known for its flexibility. In this poem, each ballad stanza eight lines, as if two traditional, four-line ballad stanzas (a.k.a. quatrains) have been merged. This effect is particularly apparent in stanza 1, where the syntax and (ABCB DEFE) rhyme scheme reinforce this structure:

> She looked over his shoulder
> For vines and olive trees,
> Marble well-governed cities
> And ships upon untamed seas,
> But there on the shining metal
> His hands had put instead
> An artificial wilderness
> And a sky like lead.

The initial quatrain describes what Thetis expects to see on the shield's surface. It is met with a "but" statement in the fifth line (essentially the start of the second quatrain), which makes clear that the pleasant imagery she seeks is nowhere to be found. This pattern is repeated later in the poem, its two-part structure reinforcing the disparity between what Thetis anticipates and what she finds.

Adhering to tradition, each rhyme royal consists of seven lines of iambic pentameter in an ABABBCC rhyme scheme. Take stanza 2:

> A plain without a feature, bare and brown,
> No blade of grass, no sign of neighborhood
> Nothing to eat and nowhere to sit down,
> Yet, congregated on its blankness, stood
> An unintelligible multitude,
> A million eyes, a million boots in line,
> Without expression, waiting for a sign.

As is the case in the poem's ballad stanzas, each rhyme royal stanza is made up of one complete sentence, whose punctuation and main structural units generally coincide with line breaks. This format is orderly and easy to follow. As such, the speaker comes across and straightforward and plain-spoken, the detached tone matching the apathy of the figures on the shield.

Furthermore, the ballad stanzas recount the glorious imagery of Homer's *Iliad*, while the rhyme royals detail the horrors that the shield actually depicts. In other words, the rhyme royals *respond* to the ballad stanzas, challenging the expectations they lay out regarding how war should be portrayed. Therefore, the fluctuations between the two poetic forms highlight the gap between how war is often depicted and its true impacts.

Finally, both the ballad form and the rhyme royal have their roots in the (oral) storytelling tradition. Because they are easy to remember, ballads were originally used to pass along songs and stories. Geoffrey Chaucer originated the rhyme royal in *Troilus and Criseyde*, an epic set during the Trojan War. Plus, Greek myths such as those referenced in the *Iliad* were passed down orally long before Homer and others recorded them.

By creating a dialogue between these two particular forms in the context of *The Iliad*, the speaker places "The Shield of Achilles" within a wider storytelling lineage. This choice emphasizes the speaker's concern with the moral implications of art as a means to transmit cultural history, especially that which concerns violence.

METER

This poem's meter is inconsistent, though it often falls into an iambic (unstressed-stressed) pattern. Because "The Shield of Achilles" is repetitive in both structure and narrative, variations in rhythm keep the poem from becoming too monotonous.

Still, the speaker sticks closely to trimeter, or three stresses per line, and tetrameter, four stresses per line, in the poem's ballad stanzas, as is typical for the form. The rhyme royal stanzas, by contrast, often fall into pentameter, or five stresses per line.

Here is the second half of stanza 1, where the meter is not

perfectly consistent but does generally have the expected three to four stresses per line of a ballad stanza:

> But there on the shining metal
> His hands had put instead
> An artificial wilderness
> And a sky like lead.

And here is a bit of stanza 2, a rhyme royal stanza, which has about five stresses in its lines (the first two lines here are actually perfect iambic pentameter, as is typical of rhyme royal):

> A plain without a feature, bare and brown,
> No blade of grass, no sign of neighborhood,
> Nothing to eat and nowhere to sit down,

Such regularity is consistent with the speaker's straightforward language and unemotional tone. But it is at odds with the turmoil that the speaker describes, highlighting the incongruity of human apathy during times of mass suffering.

The last line of each ballad stanza is short, with only five syllables, and a somewhat irregular meter. About this point in each stanza, the narrative takes a dark turn and the abruptness of the final line increases its impact. For example, here is a look at the conclusion of stanza 7 (lines 51-52):

> His hands had set no dancing-floor
> But a weed-choked field.

The metrical regularity and additional iamb in line 51 ("His hands") build momentum and make the following line come across as particularly terse. The sing-song rhythm also exaggerates the three stresses that fall on "weed-choked field," which heighten its forcefulness and intensity. Such sudden shifts in meter enact the surprise that Thetis feels upon seeing a shield that is so different from what she had expected. As such, the poem's rhythms contribute to the discord between war's popular, romantic portrayal and its devastating consequences.

Similar effects occur elsewhere in the poem to highlight important images and dramatize the speaker's harsh tone. Stanza 5, for instance, opens with "barbed wire," which receives two stresses, and ends in lines 36-37 with:

> As three pale figures were led forth and bound
> To three posts driven upright in the ground.

These concentrated groups of stressed syllables draw out the tragic scene and give its description rhythmic vigor.

In some places, the poem's meter mirrors its action, as when the troops file out in lines 21-22 in the third stanza:

> They marched away enduring a belief
> Whose logic brought them, somewhere else, to grief.

The soldiers' plod feels particularly orderly and obedient due to the consistent iambic rhythm. It repeats as the reader traces their trek across three lines, which look like "columns" on the page. The troops ultimately meet their destination—"grief"—and the stanza jolts to a stop. The meter's imitation of the soldiers' journey drives home the cause and effect at play—the soldier's passive compliance with their orders puts them on a steady path towards devastation.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Shield of Achilles" uses two different rhyme schemes. Stanzas written in ballad form generally follow an ABCB DEFE pattern (though in this poem, the B sounds in lines 2 and 4 of the ballad stanzas do not always rhyme in these stanzas within this poem). Such is the case in the first stanza, where none of the first four lines rhyme, but the 6th and 8th lines (the E sounds) do:

> But there on the shining metal D
> His hands had put instead E
> An artificial wilderness F
> And a sky like lead. E

The rhyme royal stanzas of the poem, in contrast, always follow the normal rhyme royal scheme of ABABBCC. For example, here is stanza 3, a rhyme royal stanza:

> Out of the air a voice without a face A
> Proved by statistics that some cause was *just* B
> In tones as dry and level as the place: A
> No one was cheered and nothing was *discussed;* B
> Column by column in a cloud of *dust* B
> They marched away enduring a belief C
> Whose logic brought them, somewhere else, to grief.
> C

In general, the consistency and abundance of rhyme makes the poem more memorable. Rhyme also creates a musical quality that contrasts with the dispassion and violence that the speaker describes. As such, the poem's use of rhyme magnifies existing juxtapositions—between tragedy and the figures' carefree attitude as well as between Homer's original shield and the speaker's modern interpretation.

The speaker also uses rhyme to emphasize important images and ideas, such as in the opening to stanza 6 (a rhyme royal stanza):

> The mass and majesty of this world, all
> That carries weight and always weighs the same
> Lay in the hands of others; they were small

Here, rhyme underscores how much the victims have to lose and how little power they have, increasing awareness of the scene's injustice. Similarly, rhyme can reinforce the connection between two or more words and the ideas they represent. For instance, the soldiers hang onto a thinly-substantiated "belief" that the violence they perpetrate is justified, which ultimately results in "grief." In stanza 1, the rhyme between "trees" and "seas" links the picturesque natural imagery that Thetis imagines, which is a counterpoint to the "sky like lead" that she finds "instead."

Rhyme can also create unexpected connections, like that between Achilles's strength and his death:

> ... the strong
> Iron-hearted man-slaying Achilles
> Who would not live long.

In this case, rhyme stresses the speaker's message that war is universally devastating—even for the fiercest warriors.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "The Shield of Achilles" is an omniscient narrator who observes and relates the poem's events. An anonymous commentator, the speaker reveals no personal biographical information. As this poem retells a scene from *The Iliad*, the speaker might be seen as an alternate narrator of Homer's epic, who is also omniscient but has a far more romantic view of war.

Indeed, the speaker invokes the magnificent imagery of the original shield and explicitly rejects it in favor of a much bleaker landscape. Plus, the speaker generally uses plain language and straightforward sentence structures. This approach implies disapproval of flowery, glorious representations of war in art. The speaker also uses a great deal of negation—"no blade of grass," "no one was cheered," "neither moved nor spoke," etc. As a result, the speaker comes across as oppositional and pessimistic about the role of war in society.

However, the speaker is not involved in the poem's events and never voices an opinion outright. In fact, the speaker exhibits a conspicuous *lack* of emotion or connection to the scenes described. For example, a horde who witnesses mass torture without intervening is called "a crowd of ordinary decent folk." Rather than judging the figures who appear within the poem, the speaker reports their actions in a matter-of-fact manner. In other words, the speaker's narration does not directly attempt to make change, opting for a more resigned and fatalistic account.

In this way, the speaker becomes a docile, dispassionate bystander, much like those on the shield. The speaker's own detached observations of violence and cruelty drive home a wider message: war is destructive—plain and simple—and people have become apathetic to that fact.

SETTING

"The Shield of Achilles" reimagines one book of *The Iliad*, which is set during the Trojan War (about the 12th-13th century BCE). The scene at hand takes place the palace of Hephaestos on Mount Olympus, the highest peak in Greece and home of the gods according to Greek mythology.

That said, the poem contains no references to the physical setting. Instead, the speaker describes the shield that Haephestos forges in great detail. A destitute wasteland, the backdrop for the shield's imagery diverges from—and openly rejects—popular accounts of ancient Greece. In fact, the speaker references 20th-century events and technologies, such as "statistics," "barbed wire" and the Holocaust.

However, the speaker repeatedly grounds the audience in the present moment, reminding readers that Thetis is watching Haephestos "over his shoulder." Plus, the poem both begins and ends in his workshop, so the setting never actually changes. Instead, the amalgamation of ancient and modern identifies war as a constant throughout human history. By creating this thread of continuity, the speaker suggests that modern conflicts (and attitudes towards them) stem from their ancient counterparts.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

First published in 1952, "The Shield of Achilles" serves as the title poem of Auden's 1955 poetry collection, which earned a National Book Award the following year. This poem is inspired by Homeric epic *The Iliad*, one of the earliest surviving examples of Western literature. *The Iliad* chronicles the events of the Trojan War, tracing the impacts of a feud between the great warrior Achilles and Agamemnon, leader of the Greek forces.

The epic presents a highly romanticized vision of war—one rife with adventure, thrills, and divine intervention, and whose warriors are heroic, loyal, and passionately vengeful. Because it is among the most famous works of literature, the stories, style, and themes of *The Iliad* have permeated lots of art and culture. But the speaker warns against blanketing modern conflicts with this model, which is ultimately a work of art based on myth. This poem serves as a counterpoint to such glorification of war and puts forth a more realistic—and far bleaker—alternative.

Auden was of course also influenced by his own time. A series of movements broadly known as Modernism had reshaped the literary world during the early 20th century. Generally speaking, Modernist poets wrote highly symbolic and imagistic

work, usually in free verse or experimental poetic forms (such as Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro"). Fragmented narratives became popular, as did themes exploring societal decay (see Eliot's "The Waste Land"). While "The Shield of Achilles" employs traditional forms and is not particularly symbolic, it does contain rich descriptions, entwine two disparate historical events, and have concerns about modern morality.

It also employs a fatalistic speaker who coldly reports the bleakness of the modern world—a quintessential Modernist narrator. However, the speaker suggests that such an apathetic perspective is absurd and detrimental by contrasting widespread devastation with the careless figures on the shield. Plus, the narration directly contrasts ancient and modern storytelling conventions. Therefore, the poem can be interpreted as a subtle critique of Modernist works that aestheticize modern failings without *challenging* them, which ultimately normalizes and romanticizes a resigned attitude.

Auden explored issues of morality throughout his career, generally taking a more overtly political stance in his early years and gradually becoming more spiritual and philosophical. "The Shield of Achilles" sits somewhere in the middle—it mourns the suffering brought about by World War II using muted religious language. These elements are shared with an earlier Auden poem, "Museé des Beaux Arts."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Shield of Achilles" was written in the decade after World War II, which took place from 1939-1945. This period saw unprecedented devastation, taking more lives than any conflict before or since. Tens of millions of civilians died as a result of bombings, massacres, internment, genocides, and famine, among other causes. Germany's Nazi party systematically murdered about 6 million Jews in the Holocaust, an event that sent shock waves around the world.

There was also a much larger number of photographers at the front than ever before, leading to the circulation of the most heinous and tragic photos of warfare the world had ever seen. Plus, a decrease in censorship allowed for images of the American dead to be published in the U.S. for the first time. In short, such unfiltered documentation of the trauma that war brings about confronted and stunned the world.

In the years leading up to World War II, Auden traveled extensively. He spent extended periods in Spain and China, where he documented the wars that each country was facing at home. He could sense that a great, wide-sweeping conflict was about to erupt, which reportedly contributed to his decision to immigrate to the United States from the UK in early 1939.

Auden was therefore able to draw from his own experiences, other firsthand accounts, and raw records when writing about war. Such resources were not available to Homer, who was born hundreds of years after the conclusion of the Trojan War and could reference only oral histories and other works of art. Plus, historians generally agree that the Trojan War never really took place or is an elaborate dramatization of some contemporary conflict. Auden recognized this divergence and took advantage of the remarkably full and vivid picture of war that he possessed.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Auden Reads "The Shield of Achilles" — Listen to a recording of the author reading the poem aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hpblaBb93fo)
- Auden's Life Story — A detailed look at the author's life and works from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/w-h-auden)
- "The Shield of Achilles," First Edition — Scans of Auden's 1955 poetry collection, including the title poem in its original format. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-shield-of-achilles-by-w-h-auden)
- Visualizing Achilles's Shield — Browse various artistic interpretations of Achilles's shield. (https://theshieldofachilles.net/appearance/)
- The Iliad Study Guide — A guide to Homer's Iliad from LitCharts, including a concise summary and a discussion of the shield of Achilles as a symbol. (https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-iliad/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER W. H. AUDEN POEMS

- Funeral Blues (Stop all the clocks)
- Musée des Beaux Arts
- Refugee Blues
- The Unknown Citizen

HOW TO CITE

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