Exposure / Bayonet Charge

Loss of control in war

Comparative argument

Owen and Hughes both undermine the idea that a soldier controls his own heroic actions. Owen traps a collective voice in repeated waiting, whereas Hughes follows one soldier whose sudden movement gives way to bewilderment and survival instinct.

Opposite kinds of movement

Exposure - Refrain (“But nothing happens.”): Repeated endings make apparent inaction a destructive cycle, not safety.

Bayonet Charge - Abrupt opening (“Suddenly”): The reader enters the charge without preparation, sharing the soldier’s disorientation.

Connection: Contrast structural stasis with frantic motion; both deny a purposeful military narrative.

Forces larger than the soldier

Exposure - Personification (“merciless”): Weather acquires an attacker’s cruelty and replaces the expected human enemy.

Bayonet Charge - Mechanical metaphor (“cold clockwork”): The soldier imagines himself caught in an impersonal system he cannot understand.

Connection: Both reduce human agency, through hostile nature and through a mechanism of history or command.

Ideals tested by bodily suffering

Exposure - Metaphorical ending (“ice”): The final burial scene converts exposure into irreversible loss; recurring waiting has not prevented death.

Bayonet Charge - Dismissive listing (“etcetera”): Patriotic abstractions lose their apparent importance when bodily survival dominates.

Connection: Evaluate how each ending dismantles reassuring ideas of military purpose.

Relevant context

Owen served in the First World War; Hughes imagines combat and should not be described as a First World War eyewitness. Link this distinction to voice rather than assuming only eyewitness writing can represent fear.

Plan your argument

Open with the comparative thesis and qualify the main difference.

Paragraph 1: Opposite kinds of movement. Contrast structural stasis with frantic motion; both deny a purposeful military narrative.

Paragraph 2: Forces larger than the soldier. Both reduce human agency, through hostile nature and through a mechanism of history or command.

Paragraph 3: Ideals tested by bodily suffering. Evaluate how each ending dismantles reassuring ideas of military purpose.

Conclude by explaining how the endings change your understanding of the shared theme.

Try a question

Compare how poets present loss of control in war in ‘Exposure’ and in one other poem from your anthology.

Suggested comparison: Bayonet Charge. You may choose a different poem from your prescribed cluster.

Check your understanding

How can waiting and running create a similar loss of agency?

Why do nature and machinery matter?

How do the endings test patriotic explanations of war?

Original critical notes by Exam Stash. Use your own edition or anthology alongside these notes.