

# Counter Attack By Siegfried Sassoon

Counter-Attack

We'd gained our first objective hours before  
While dawn broke like a face with blinking eyes,  
Pallid, unshaven and thirsty, blind with smoke,  
Things seemed all right at first. We held their line,  
With bombers posted, Lewis guns well placed,  
And clink of shovels deepening the shallow trench.  
The place was rotten with dead; green clumsy legs  
High-booted, sprawled and grovelled along the saps  
And trunks, face downward, in the sucking mud,  
Wallowed like trodden sand-bags loosely filled;  
And naked sodden buttocks, mats of hair,  
Bulged, clotted heads slept in the plastering slime.  
And then the rain began,—the jolly old rain!

A yawning soldier knelt against the bank,  
Staring across the morning bleak with fog;  
He wondered when the Allemands would get busy;  
And then, of course, they started with five-nines  
Traversing, sure as fate, and never a dud.  
Mute in the clamour of shells he watched them burst  
Spouting dark earth and wire with gusts from hell,  
While posturing giants dissolved in drifts of smoke.  
He crouched and flinched, dizzy with galloping fear,  
Sick for escape,—loathing the strangled horror  
And butchered, frantic gestures of the dead.

An officer came blundering down the trench:  
"Stand-to and man the fire step!" On he went ...  
Gasping and bawling, "Fire-step ... counter-attack!"  
Then the haze lifted. Bombing on the right  
Down the old sap: machine-guns on the left;  
And stumbling figures looming out in front,  
"O Christ, they're coming at us!" Bullets spat,  
And he remembered his rifle ... rapid fire ...  
And started blazing wildly ... then a bang  
Crumpled and spun him sideways, knocked him out  
To grunt and wriggle: none heeded him; he choked  
And fought the flapping veils of smothering gloom,  
Lost in a blurred confusion of yells and groans ...  
Down, and down, and down, he sank and drowned,  
Bleeding to death. The counter-attack had failed.

Siegfried Sassoon

How does Sassoon create a sense of horror in this poem?

Point:	Evidence	Explanation	Analysis of language
In stanza (1/2/3) Sassoon creates a sense of horror when he describes ...	The text states ...	This creates horror because ...	The use of 'X' emphasises ... The use of 'Y' highlights ... The use of 'Z' stresses ...
		Alternatively ...	

## Understanding "Counter-Attack" by Siegfried Sassoon

"Counter Attack" is a powerful poem by Siegfried Sassoon that vividly captures the brutality and despair of World War I. Written during a time when the horrors of trench warfare were at their peak, Sassoon's work serves not only as a reflection of his personal experiences as a soldier but also as a broader commentary on the futility of war. In this article, we will delve into the themes, structure, and the historical context surrounding "Counter Attack," providing a comprehensive understanding of this poignant piece.

## Historical Context of "Counter Attack"

Siegfried Sassoon, a British poet and soldier, fought in World War I and became known for his outspoken criticism of the war. His experiences on the

front lines deeply influenced his writing, and "Counter Attack," published in 1917, serves as a testament to the psychological and physical toll of the conflict.

1. **The War Experience:** Sassoon enlisted in the British Army and served in the trenches, where he witnessed the death and destruction caused by the war. His writing reflects his disillusionment with the romanticized notions of warfare that were prevalent in earlier literature.

2. **The Anti-War Sentiment:** By the time Sassoon wrote "Counter Attack," many soldiers were beginning to question the purpose of the war. The poem encapsulates this sentiment, highlighting the stark reality faced by those on the front lines.

## **Analysis of Themes**

"Counter Attack" explores several key themes that resonate throughout the poem, underscoring the futility and horror of war.

### **1. The Horrors of War**

The most prominent theme in "Counter Attack" is the unrelenting horror of battle. Sassoon uses vivid imagery to depict the chaos and violence of the battlefield. The poem opens with a dramatic scene that immerses the reader in the sounds and sights of war:

- **Imagery of Death:** The poet describes the wounded and dying soldiers, emphasizing their suffering and the senselessness of their plight.
- **Sensory Details:** Sassoon employs visceral language to evoke the sights, sounds, and smells of the battlefield, allowing readers to experience the horror firsthand.

### **2. The Futility of War**

Sassoon's portrayal of war is not romanticized; instead, it reveals the futility of combat. The title "Counter Attack" itself implies a response to aggression, yet the poem questions whether such actions have any meaningful purpose.

- **Cynicism:** Throughout the poem, there is a sense of cynicism regarding the idea of heroism in battle. Soldiers are depicted as pawns in a larger game, their lives expendable and their sacrifices meaningless.
- **Emotional Toll:** The emotional and psychological effects of war are highlighted, showcasing the trauma experienced by soldiers who are forced to confront death on a daily basis.

### 3. Brotherhood and Isolation

Despite the horrors of war, Sassoon also emphasizes the camaraderie among soldiers. However, this brotherhood is juxtaposed with a profound sense of isolation and despair.

- Shared Suffering: The bonds formed between soldiers in the face of adversity are powerful, yet they serve as a reminder of the shared trauma that cannot be easily communicated to those outside the war.
- Isolation in Experience: The poem suggests that while soldiers may fight side by side, the internal struggles and psychological burdens they carry remain deeply personal and isolating.

## Structure and Form

"Counter Attack" is structured in a way that enhances its emotional impact, employing a variety of poetic techniques.

### 1. Free Verse and Rhythm

Sassoon uses free verse to convey a sense of spontaneity and urgency. The lack of a rigid structure reflects the chaotic nature of war, allowing the poem to flow organically.

- Natural Speech Patterns: The poem mimics natural speech, making it accessible and relatable. This technique helps convey the genuine emotions of the soldiers.
- Varying Line Lengths: The varying lengths of lines create a dynamic rhythm, mirroring the unpredictability of combat.

### 2. Powerful Imagery and Symbolism

Sassoon's use of imagery is one of the poem's most striking features. The vivid descriptions serve to immerse the reader in the realities of war.

- Symbolism of the Battlefield: The battlefield itself becomes a symbol of despair, representing not just a physical space but also the mental and emotional landscape of the soldiers.
- Imagery of Nature: Sassoon contrasts the brutality of war with references to nature, highlighting the stark difference between the beauty of the natural world and the horrors of human conflict.

### 3. Tone and Mood

The tone of "Counter Attack" shifts throughout the poem, creating a complex emotional landscape.

- Despair and Anguish: The opening lines establish a mood of despair, reflecting the grim reality faced by soldiers.
- Moments of Reflection: As the poem progresses, there are moments of reflection that invite readers to consider the broader implications of war and its impact on humanity.

## Conclusion

Siegfried Sassoon's "Counter Attack" stands as a powerful indictment of the horrors and futility of war. Through its vivid imagery, emotional depth, and poignant themes, the poem captures the essence of a soldier's experience during World War I.

As readers engage with Sassoon's work, they are invited to reflect on the cost of war—not just in terms of lives lost but also in the emotional and psychological scars that remain. "Counter Attack" serves as a reminder of the importance of understanding the true nature of conflict, urging us to remember the human toll that accompanies the pursuit of glory on the battlefield.

In a world where the specter of war continues to loom large, Sassoon's poignant words resonate with timeless relevance, challenging us to confront the realities of violence and the necessity for peace.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### What is the main theme of Siegfried Sassoon's poem 'Counter-Attack'?

The main theme of 'Counter-Attack' is the brutal reality of war, focusing on the horrors and futility of combat, as well as the psychological impact on soldiers.

### How does Sassoon depict the experiences of soldiers in 'Counter-Attack'?

Sassoon vividly depicts the grim experiences of soldiers through graphic imagery, highlighting their suffering, fear, and the chaotic nature of battle.

## **What literary techniques does Sassoon use in 'Counter-Attack' to convey his message?**

Sassoon employs vivid imagery, stark contrasts, and a conversational tone to enhance the emotional impact of the poem and convey the harsh realities of war.

## **In what ways does 'Counter-Attack' reflect Sassoon's anti-war sentiments?**

The poem reflects Sassoon's anti-war sentiments by illustrating the senselessness of conflict, the loss of life, and the psychological trauma faced by soldiers.

## **What historical context influenced the writing of 'Counter-Attack'?**

Sassoon wrote 'Counter-Attack' during World War I, a time marked by unprecedented violence and loss, which deeply influenced his perspective on warfare.

## **How does the title 'Counter-Attack' relate to the content of the poem?**

The title 'Counter-Attack' suggests a military strategy but ironically contrasts with the poem's focus on the chaos and suffering experienced by soldiers rather than strategic victories.

## **What role does nature play in 'Counter-Attack'?**

Nature in 'Counter-Attack' serves as a backdrop to the violence, contrasting the beauty of the landscape with the brutality of war, emphasizing the destruction wrought by human conflict.

## **How does Sassoon's personal experience as a soldier influence 'Counter-Attack'?**

Sassoon's personal experience as a soldier in World War I provides authenticity to 'Counter-Attack,' allowing him to convey the genuine emotions and realities faced by combatants.

## **What impact has 'Counter-Attack' had on modern perceptions of war poetry?**

'Counter-Attack' has significantly shaped modern perceptions of war poetry by highlighting the psychological and physical toll of war, influencing both literary and societal views on conflict.

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