

Conquerors by Henry Treece

By sundown we came to a hidden village
Where all the air was still
And no sound met our tired ears, save
For the sorry drip of rain from blackened trees
And the melancholy song of swinging gates.

Then through a broken pane some of us saw
A dead bird in a rusting cage, still
Pressing his thin tattered breast against the bars,
His beak wide open. And
As we hurried through the weed-grown street,
A gaunt dog started up from some dark place
And shambled off on legs as thin as sticks

Into the wood, to die at least in peace.
No one had told us victory was like this;
Not one amongst us would have eaten bread
Before he'd filled the mouth of the grey child
That sprawled, stiff as stone, before the shattered door.
There was not one who did not think of home.

Notes:

The title of the poem brings to mind conquering heroes and parades in which the victors are cheered and hailed for their achievements. They have succeeded. They have won.

The poem opens almost mid-story, as if we have been hearing about the soldiers' journey: 'By sundown we came to a hidden village'. This creates a sense of immediacy as we are drawn straight into the narrative. As the village is 'hidden', readers may feel hopeful that it has escaped the ravages of war. However, this hope is soon dashed. The air is 'still', so there is no sign of life. The tone here is ominous. The imagery in this first stanza is bleak and mournful as the exhausted soldiers' 'tired ears' hear nothing but the 'sorry drip of rain from blackened trees' and the 'melancholy' creaking of swinging gates. Note the adjectives: 'still', 'tired', 'sorry', 'blackened' and 'melancholy'. All of these

contribute to an air of emptiness and loss. The fact that it is 'sundown' adds to the dreary feeling and the sense of things ending.

A good exercise at this stage in the poem is to underline the adjectives. Look at some of those in the second stanza: 'broken', 'dead', 'rusting', 'thin', 'tattered', 'weed-grown', 'gaunt' and 'dark'. It is easy to see how they convey an atmosphere of depression and despair. The bird in the cage is a metaphor for all of those innocents who are trapped by war, unable to escape. The bird dies with his 'thin tattered breast' pressed against the bars of the cage as his efforts to free himself came to nothing. His beak is wide open, which makes us think of both a cry for help and begging for food. There is no note of comfort here and we cannot believe death came quickly or easily. Similarly, the emaciated dog hiding 'in some dark place' is frightened enough by the sound of the approaching men to leave his hiding place and walk unsteadily into the woods where he can 'at least' die in peace. There is something very telling about the phrase 'die in peace'. It reminds us that the missing inhabitants of the town did not 'die in peace'. The juxtaposition of the words 'die' and 'peace' also highlights the fact that it is war that caused these deaths and that in times of peace no such horrors would have taken place. The fact that the deaths were horrific is driven home by the simple words 'at least'. If the dog can 'die at least in peace', he is luckier than his lost owners, and that is a dreadful thought.

The final stanza of the poem is the horror to which the other stanzas have been building. We learned of the dead bird, the dying dog, and now we are told of the 'grey child' who lies 'stiff as stone' before the 'shattered door' of his home. The soldiers are shocked. Victory should have been a time of glory and honour; they never thought it 'was like this'. The harsh reality of war has been revealed to them: in order for one side to win, the other must be conquered. Now the title of the poem comes to mind as we compare our original idea of conquerors to this dreadful scene. The speaker tells us that 'No one' had told the soldiers the true price of victory and that 'Not one' of them would have denied the child any food they had. The repetition in 'No one', 'not one' and the 'not one' in the final line drives home the speaker's message with great force. Each of the men, as he looks at the body of the child and the ruined, deserted village, thinks of his own home and how easily this situation could have been reversed, has his side not been the 'Conquerors'.

This poem could be used to answer a question on:

- ✓ War
- ✓ Seeing things from a different perspective