

AFTER BLENHEIM

After Blenheim : About the poem

‘After Blenheim’ by Robert Southey is an **anti-war poem** that centres around one of the major battles of eighteenth century – the Battle of Blenheim. Written in 1796 in the form of a **ballad**, it offers deep insights on war and its consequences. The 1704 War of Spanish Succession, in which a coalition of forces including the English, defeated the Franco-Bavarian army on the land of Blenheim, a small village in Southern Germany, supplies its ingredients.

Through a **conversation** between an old farmer, Kaspar and his grandchildren, Wilhelmine and Peterkin the poet gradually reveals the scene of a former battlefield. One of the kids has found something ‘large and round’ which his grandfather explains is a skull, one of many to be found nearby. Similar instances run through the poem to support the main ideas – **tragic end of war & the vulnerability of human life**. The poem *After Blenheim* makes us ponder on the purpose and result of a war and even questions its validity.

The war caused huge devastation and thousands of casualties. But Old Kaspar seems to have an unconcerned attitude towards this as he claims that ‘it was a famous victory’ and ‘things like that must be’. His gruesome

descriptions, followed by his casual sayings create an effect of **irony**. It is ironic that it was a great war but no one knows why.

After Blenheim: Form and Style

This ballad is separated into **11 equal verses**. The poet has followed the rhyming scheme **abcbdd** in all the stanzas except the second one. The style used by the poet is a **conversation** between two people of very different ages – the younger age representing vigor, restlessness and curiosity whereas the old age depicts experience, knowledge and passivity.

Iambic tetrameter (four iambic feet) and **iambic trimeter** (three iambic feet) lines alternate throughout the poem with the last two lines in each stanza being in tetrameter. This is a typical characteristic of a ballad.

Old **KAS** | par's **WORK** | was **DONE**, (Iambic Trimeter)

And **HE** | be **FORE** | his **COT** | tage **DOOR** (Iambic Tetrameter)

Was **SIT** | ting **IN** | the **SUN**, (Iambic Trimeter)

In several stanzas of *After Blenheim*, Southey uses **alliteration** to promote rhyme and euphony. Here are some perfect examples.

Now tell us what 'twas all about,

With wonder-waiting eyes;

They say it was a shocking sight

Southey's use of **archaic speeches** (*Nay... nay... my little girl, quoth he*) and apostrophe by removing a silent vowel (as in *'twas*) helps to create an atmosphere of antiquity and makes the ballad more entertaining.

A **recurring line** comes at the end of some stanzas: "*But 'twas a famous victory.*" And such use of repetition is another prominent feature of a ballad. Old Kaspar continuously repeats this sentence as this is all he knows about the war. But this is certainly not what the poem is saying. Rather, Southey uses this phrase **to emphasize the exact opposite** – that it wasn't really a great victory; war can never be 'great'. It's a highly effective way of making his point.

After Blenheim by Southey: Explanation by stanza

It was a summer evening,
Old Kaspar's work was done,
And he before his cottage door
Was sitting in the sun,
And by him sported on the green
His little grandchild Wilhelmine.

The poem begins by picturizing a vivid scene of a summer evening. It is the time when most people return from work. The days are long and tiring in summers, and the sun sets late in the evening. An elderly farmer named

Kaspar sits in front of his cottage watching his grandchildren Wilhelmine and Peterkin at play on the lush green field.

She saw her brother Peterkin
Roll something large and round,
Which he beside the rivulet
In playing there had found;
He came to ask what he had found,
That was so large, and smooth, and round.

As Wilhelmine was playing, she saw her brother Peterkin rolling something ‘large, smooth and round’ which he had found beside the river. Meanwhile Kaspar was sitting around observing his actions. Out of curiosity, Peterkin takes that ‘something’ to his grandfather, wanting to know about it.

That was so large, and smooth, and round.
Old Kaspar took it from the boy,
Who stood expectant by;
And then the old man shook his head,
And, with a natural sigh —
“Tis some poor fellow’s skull,” said he,
“Who fell in the great victory.

The elderly Kaspar took that round thing from the boy, who was left in anticipation. After a brief look at it, the old man shook his head with a sigh and found it to be a skull of some ‘poor fellow’ which refers to a soldier who had died in the war – in the Battle of Blenheim – ‘in the great victory’.

“I find them in the garden,
For there’s many here about;
And often when I go to plough,
The ploughshare turns them out.
For many thousand men,” said he,
“Were slain in that great victory.”

The Battle of Blenheim led to the death of thousands of soldiers whose corpses lie deep scattered in the field. Further, Kaspar relates how he had found many such objects while plowing the fields. The ‘great victory’ refers to the triumph in the battle which also happens to be an example of sheer patriotism. Kaspar believed that the soldiers sacrificed their life for the country and did not die in vain. Their death served the purpose of victory in the battle.

“Now tell us what ’twas all about,”
Young Peterkin, he cries;
And little Wilhelmine looks up
With wonder-waiting eyes;

“Now tell us all about the war,
And what they fought each other for.”

Hearing about the battle, the children were restless to know more about it. For them the battle seemed to bring thrill and excitement along with certain amazement. Little Wilhelmine was so curious to know about the war and the reason behind it that it reflected in her eyes gleaming for a wonder to unfold. The poet reflects upon the zeal and enthusiasm associated with young age. The **ability to question things** is a peculiar quality of kids which fades away with growing age.

“It was the English,” Kaspar cried,
“Who put the French to rout;
But what they fought each other for,
I could not well make out;
But everybody said,” quoth he,
“That ’twas a famous victory.”

History books tell us that the British defeated the Franco-Bavarian army in the Battle of Blenheim. Kaspar tries to answer the questions posed by his grandchildren by telling them this piece of information. The interesting point to note here is – he doesn’t know the reason behind the war. In fact, he doesn’t try to find it! He remembers what everybody told him – the victory was famous, and

he repeated it to himself time and again and put some belief in the words.

“My father lived at Blenheim then,
Yon little stream hard by;
They burnt his dwelling to the ground,
And he was forced to fly;
So with his wife and child he fled,
Nor had he where to rest his head.”

At this juncture of the poem ‘After Blenheim’, Kaspar recollects from the past, some of the scenarios of the war. He begins by remembering his father who lived in a small village of Blenheim near a river. The French wrecked havoc in the village and burnt homes of several innocent people to the ground. Consequently, the villagers were forced to migrate in search for shelter. The young Kaspar along with his parents fled to a different place but could not find a home because of the impending war. They had to roam from one place to another seeking rest.

“With fire and sword the country round
Was wasted far and wide,
And many a childing mother then,
And new-born baby died;
But things like that, you know, must be
At every famous victory.

In the above stanza of *'After Blenheim'*, the poet describes the severity of battle. 'Fire' and 'sword' are symbols of man's cruelty for man. They represent destruction, death and horror. 'Wasted' is an emotionally charged word. It conjures an image of a land raped of any use, purpose and dignity. It shows both the futility of war and its power to destroy. The image of mother and baby killed in war here makes us see battle as catastrophic of both present and future. It powerfully evokes the death of innocence. Whether he believes it or not, Kaspar has resigned to the inevitability of death. That's why he takes those killings casually and thinks it 'must be' there at every such victory. 'Famous victory' is intentionally repeated by the poet to create a sense of irony.

“They say it was a shocking sight
After the field was won;
For many thousand bodies here
Lay rotting in the sun;
But things like that, you know, must be
After a famous victory.”

The poet goes on to depict the terror of war. When the battle was over, thousands of dead bodies of soldiers lay rotting in the field. There are some sound effects in this stanza helped by the assonance of 'shocking' and 'rotting' and the alliteration in the first line. Combined, they give

greater resonance to the horrendous image of death. The scene of ‘rotting’ reduces dead men to carrion. An emotive, vivid word, it shows how war not only takes away life but also dignity and humanity.

“Great praise the Duke of Marlbro’ won,
And our good Prince Eugene.”

“Why, ’twas a very wicked thing!”

Said little Wilhelmine.

“Nay... nay... my little girl,” quoth he,

“It was a famous victory.

The Duke of Marlbro & Prince Eugene representing Britain won the battle which lasted for days. Here Kaspar praises the Duke and the Prince for having defeated the French and bringing glories to the nation.

A confused Wilhelmine exclaimed that it (war) was a ‘wicked’ thing and wondered how her grandpa could sing praises of such a bloody war. Again, Kaspar quotes that it was a ‘famous victory’. It is obvious that the old man is hiding all the destruction and agony caused by the war by repeating these two words. He seems to be afraid of breaking the romantic ideals of war so carefully brought up in his mind.

“And everybody praised the Duke
Who this great fight did win.”

“But what good came of it at last?”

Quoth little Peterkin.

“Why that I cannot tell,” said he,

“But ’twas a **famous** victory.”

Victory has many fathers but defeat is an orphan. Staying true to these words, many people praised the Duke for having won the war and Kaspar recalls this with some delight. Peterkin then anticipated on the very purpose of war and what it led to. What good did it do? But the old man did not have any answers to such questions. All he knew was that it was a famous victory.

The poet again repeats the line “*But ’twas a famous victory*”. This line is an epitome of irony. The war was fought over a trivial dispute but costed lives of thousands and thousands of soldiers. The only thing inevitable in a war is destruction of life and property. **Victory cannot bring back all the lives which were lost during the war.** Hence, the poet questions the purpose and need of war. Thus the poem ‘After Blenheim’ successfully conveys his message – war is futile and should be avoided.