

Bayonet Charge – stanza-by-stanza summary and analysis

Stanza 1

The poem begins in the middle of action ('in media res'). The soldier is suddenly running across a battlefield:

“Suddenly he awoke and was running”

This makes the reader feel as if the soldier has been thrown straight into violence without time to think. The word **“awoke”** suggests confusion, as though he has snapped out of sleep or a dream and found himself in a nightmare.

He is carrying his rifle with a bayonet attached, but he is not presented as heroic or confident. His body is described as awkward and heavy:

“Stumbling across a field of clods”

The word **“stumbling”** suggests panic and lack of control. He is not marching bravely; he is struggling to move. The **“field of clods”** makes the battlefield seem rough, muddy and difficult to cross.

Hughes also focuses on physical sensations:

“The patriotic tear that had brimmed in his eye / Sweating like molten iron from the centre of his chest”

This suggests that any earlier patriotism or belief in fighting for his country is now being destroyed by fear. The simile **“molten iron”** makes his fear seem burning, painful and unbearable.

By the end of the stanza, the soldier's actions seem automatic. He is not thinking clearly. He is just running because survival has taken over.

Stanza 2

In the second stanza, the soldier briefly stops or becomes mentally frozen:

“In bewilderment then he almost stopped”

This shows his confusion. He starts questioning what he is doing and why he is there. The poem moves from physical action into psychological panic.

Hughes uses a powerful question:

“In what cold clockwork of the stars and the nations / Was he the hand pointing that second?”

This suggests that the soldier feels like a tiny part of a much bigger machine. The phrase **“cold clockwork”** makes war seem mechanical, emotionless and controlled by governments or fate. The soldier is compared to the **“hand”** of a clock, suggesting he has no real power of his own.

This stanza shows the soldier losing his sense of purpose. Ideas like honour, duty and patriotism no longer feel meaningful. He feels trapped inside something much bigger than himself.

The stanza ends with the shocking image of a hare:

“a yellow hare that rolled like a flame / And crawled in a threshing circle”

The hare has been injured by the fighting. Its pain mirrors the soldier's fear and suffering. The phrase **“rolled like a flame”** suggests agony and violence, while **“threshing”** suggests frantic, painful movement. The natural world is being destroyed by war, just like the soldier's humanity.

Stanza 3

In the final stanza, the soldier continues running, but now he seems completely changed. The injured hare has shown him the reality of war: suffering, pain and instinctive survival.

Hughes lists the ideas that once motivated him:

“King, honour, human dignity, etcetera”

The word **“etcetera”** is deliberately dismissive. It suggests that these grand patriotic ideas now feel meaningless. In the middle of battle, they do not help him survive.

The soldier is now driven by terror:

“His terror's touchy dynamite”

This metaphor suggests that his fear is explosive and dangerous. He has become like a weapon himself, powered by panic rather than patriotism.

The final image shows him running towards danger:

“To get out of that blue crackling air / His terror's touchy dynamite.”

The **“blue crackling air”** suggests bullets, explosions and the electric violence of battle. He is not moving forward because he believes in the cause. He is moving because he is terrified and desperate to escape.

By the end of the poem, Hughes shows that war strips away patriotic ideals and leaves only fear, confusion and survival instinct. The soldier is no longer presented as a brave hero, but as a frightened human being trapped in a violent situation.