

A Ballad of Footmen

In "Men, Women and Ghosts," amidst the tumult of conquerors entering the city, an old man on his deathbed yearns to immortalize the moment of conquest not in the sounds of war but through the vibrant life of roses, symbolizing a peaceful resistance to the chaos outside. This juxtaposition sets the stage for a reflective and poignant critique on the absurdity of war in "A Ballad of Footmen."

The ballad questions the rationale behind war, portraying it as an irrational destruction of life's essence, spurred not by a genuine need or desire for conflict but by a perverse yearning for excitement among men. It highlights the tragic involvement of fifteen million soldiers, armed trivially with "popguns and horses," in a deadly game dictated by minor disagreements and the whims of leadership, suggesting a profound disconnection between the value of human life and the bureaucratic machinery of war.

The narrative powerfully evokes the image of a world ensnared in grief, with "nine nations of women choking with tears," underscoring the widespread sorrow and the senseless loss inflicted upon families and communities. The poem criticizes the ability of a bureaucratic system to suppress basic human emotions and values, ridiculing the notion that mere symbols of authority, such as "a little gold lace" and "an upturned moustache," can compel individuals to face unimaginable horrors for the satisfaction of a single ruler's desires.

A speculative solution is offered, imagining a scenario wherein soldiers collectively refuse to participate in their own demise, challenging the authority of the emperor. This vision of defiance through unity and peace proposes a simple yet profound question: What power would an angry emperor hold if the multitude of men chose to prioritize their lives and values over blind obedience to destructive commands?

This chapter, while deeply rooted in the imagery and repercussions of war, ultimately serves as a poignant reflection on the value of individual life against the backdrop of collective folly, urging a reconsideration of the means by which societies choose to resolve their differences.