



# ST. LAWRENCE HIGH SCHOOL

A JESUIT CHRISTIAN MINORITY INSTITUTION



## STUDY MATERIAL 5

**Sub: ENGLISH 'B'**

**Class: XII**

**Topic : ASLEEP IN THE VALLEY**

**Date: 18.05.2020**

**About the Poet:** Arthur Rimbaud's full name was Jean Nicolas Arthur Rimbaud. He was a French poet and was called 'the marvellous boy' of French poetry because by the age of thirteen, he had already won several prizes for his verses in school. Most of his poetry was composed during his youth, between the years 1870-1875, which is why he is popularly referred to the "boy poet". In fact, his first collection of poems was published in 1870 at the age of 16. The famous writer, Victor Hugo, called him 'an infant Shakespeare'; such was his skill in poetry. At the age of just 37 years, he left for his heavenly abode.

**Summary of the poem:** 'Asleep In The Valley' was written in 1870, at a time when France was at war with Germany, which back then was known as Prussia. This poem is an English translation of the original version which was written in French, and was called 'Le Dormeur du Val'. The poem starts with a peaceful and tranquil natural setting. A green valley nestled between mountains sparkles brightly in the sunlight. A stream flows gently down the valley. In such a picturesque setting, the poet finds the body of a soldier, lying pale and open-mouthed on the grassy floor. He seems all innocent, pure and simple. But a closer look at him reveals a shocking and bitter truth. He is resting for sure but his rest is the long rest of eternal sleep. His life has come to a brutal and unfortunate end with two bullet injuries in his side. The poet invokes Nature to keep the dead soldier warm and in peace, without any disturbance whatsoever.

**Form and Structure of the poem:** The poem is written in the form of a sonnet. A sonnet is, by definition, a poem that consists of exactly fourteen lines. There are two categories of sonnets – the one originally made popular by the Italian poet, Francesco Petrarch and the other made popular by the Elizabethan poet, William Shakespeare. This particular poem, Asleep In The Valley, is a Petrarchan sonnet. So what's the difference between a Petrarchan sonnet and a Shakespearean sonnet? Well, the difference is in their construction. The Petrarchan sonnet has two halves, divided into the first 8 lines, called the Octave and the next six lines, called the Sestet. The Shakespearean sonnet, on the other hand is divided into 3 Quatrains of 4 lines each and a concluding couplet that consists of two lines which rhyme. You will notice that 'Asleep In The Valley' has 2 parts. The first half is an Octave of 8 lines that consists of two quatrains while the second half is a Sestet of 6 lines that consists of two tercets. Quatrain is the technical term for a stanza consisting of four lines while Tercet is the name given to a stanza that contains three lines. So 'Asleep In The Valley' is a Petrarchan or Italian sonnet.

**Tone and Setting of the poem:** The poem is set in a war-ravaged valley surrounded by mountains and through which a slow stream flows. In the middle of this scenic valley, however, lies a soldier who is dead. He is the unfortunate victim of a war that took place in this same valley that now appears so peaceful and serene. The tone of the poem is slow and poignant and the overall mood is melancholic. However, the melancholy is undercut by an appreciation of life and acceptance of death. The

melancholic yet peaceful mood is achieved by the slow, gentle pace of the poem and by Rimbaud's attention to life, which is portrayed in the form of nature surrounding the dead soldier. However, in the last line, the mood quickly changes to one of shock, because that is where the speaker tells us that the soldier is actually dead and not asleep as previously described. The poem is noted for its change in tone. The tone changes according to the setting. The green valley surrounded by mountains and with a stream flowing gently is described in a picturesque manner. The tone here is one of serenity and calm. In the middle of the poem the tone becomes serious and apprehensive of an impending disaster as the soldier appears pale and cold. At the end of the poem, the tone becomes sad as the two red holes reveal that the soldier has died. A sensitive reader can easily detect the element of sorrow in the untimely demise of the young soldier even though his final resting place, the valley, is happy and beautiful.

**Theme or Central Idea of the poem:** 'Asleep In The Valley' belongs to the genre of anti-war poetry. The central idea of the poem is the death of a young soldier as a result of war. In spite of the beautiful imagery of the poem, it is a poem about war and the futility of war. The protagonist of the poem is a young soldier who is shot to death, probably by soldiers against whom he was fighting. Undercutting the image of a beautiful valley, we can see the destruction wrought by war. The poem is a gentle irony against the sacrifice of thousands of soldiers for the sake of war. The poet wants to therefore convey that there is no glory in war. Rather, there is glory and beauty in life and hence, it is the responsibility of every individual to remain alive and not throw away his life, not even in war. Now this message is important because it is a personal one and comes from someone who had a first-hand experience of warfare. Rimbaud was a soldier for a very short span of time. He had fought in the Franco-Dutch war of 1870 and saw from very close quarters the brutality and horrors of war. And that is why he abhors war and says that war is futile and mindless.

The body of the soldier is lying in a valley that is bursting with life. Everything in the valley seems to be alive. Amidst the wrecks of war, the poet manages to appreciate life in the form of sunlight, water, flowers, insects, and the grass on which the soldier is lying. This means that even amidst death, life surrounds us. However, this can also mean that although life is beautiful and all around us, death is inevitable and sudden.

Death and sleep are used interchangeably in the poem. Death in this poem is represented as sleep; a sleep that is peaceful and never ending. It is also, a sleep which is safe from all further harm. Just as Rimbaud believed in embracing life, he believed in accepting death. For him, death is sad and unfortunate, but ultimately, death is a saviour. It ends all suffering and finally brings us the peace we long for. That is why he even turns the tragic death of the soldier into a peaceful sleep in order to present life as the ultimate beauty. Rimbaud tells us to look for the blessings of life even in the midst of the darkness of war and death. He also tells us that death is not an enemy. On the contrary, it is a peaceful end.

**Critical Analysis of the poem:** The poem begins almost lazily, with attention to details like the slow pace of the stream, the reflection it makes on the grass, and the ample sunlight. Like the slow stream that passes through the valley, the poem advances to the second stanza. The second stanza brings our eyes to a young soldier who seems to be asleep among the ferns and flowers of the valley. The soldier lies with his mouth slightly opened, as if in deep sleep. The poet compares this to the smile of an infant, which is symbolic of tenderness and innocence. The poet's attempt to describe a soldier as innocent

and gentle like an infant may seem far-fetched but in this, we see the genius of Rimbaud, who uses unexpected analogies to present harsh reality. One can assume that what he meant by this, was to tell us that soldiers are not the root cause of suffering, that they are not inherently violent individuals; they are merely instruments of war, puppets at the hands of their masters and the governments they serve. So, in a way, they are innocent of the crimes they commit during a war. In the line, 'Ah, Nature, keep him warm; he may catch cold', the tenderness the poet feels for the dead soldier is obvious. He implores Nature to keep his body from growing cold. Cold here is symbolic of death. The poet knows the soldier is already dead but he wants his readers to wait till the last line of the poem to figure this important detail out. The poem is written like a telescope which focuses on different parts of the valley and zooms in on the details. First, the poet focuses on a panoramic view of the valley, from which he moves to the mountains and then the body of the soldier in the meadow. He zooms in on the soldier's feet and then his face, specifically his smile. Rimbaud waits until the last line of the poem to reveal that the soldier is dead. His delay in portraying the death of the soldier is perhaps to heighten the effect and to shock the readers into seeing the negative impacts of war.

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