

Question:

The poem “Eve of Waterloo” highlights how laughter, love and chivalry turn into tears and sighs and bravery in battle is reduced to a handful of dust. Discuss.

Answer:

The Eve of Waterloo by Lord Byron is a narrative poem, exciting as well as full of pathos. The poem is based on a true incident, which happened just before the battle of Waterloo. The battle took place in June, 1815, in Waterloo, a village about eleven miles from Brussels, where the Duke of Wellington defeated his famous French rival Napoleon. Napoleon was sent to exile and imprisonment. When Napoleon was advancing towards Brussels, the Duke of Wellington was with his officers, attending a ball thrown by Charlotte, the Duchess of Richmond. While the ball was at its height, the news of Napoleon’s advancement brought a pause to the enjoyment and one by one the soldiers went for the field.

The poem at the beginning highlights the ball where the beautiful women and the brave warriors had gathered. The atmosphere was

filled with romance, with the lamps shining all around and soft music being played. The English officers and their fair ladies were dancing to the fair music. As the music “rose with its voluptuous swell”, the dancing couples exchanged loving glances, and “all went merry as a marriage bell”. As everybody was enjoying themselves at the party, they suddenly heard the sound of a cannon fire resembling a rising “knell”. But this made no impact on the rising hearts. They ignored it as if it were the sound of wind or that of rattling cars over a stony street. They decided to continue with their celebrations until the early hours of the morning. But once again they heard that heavy sound, “nearer, clearer, deadlier than before”. And reality dawned upon them that it was the cannons’ opening roar.

They gave up their merrymaking. The women bade farewell to the men folk with tears in their eyes, and shrieking sighs. The soldiers began to prepare for war. Thus, the night which was a short while ago full of love, gave way to distress and sorrow with remote hope of reunion.

The Duke of Brunswick, a guest at the ball,

was the first to recognize the sound as a cannon's roar. Immediately, he rushed to the field outside, and fell, fighting as a hero. The soldiers understood that war was at their doorstep. The officers mounted the horses and rode out with impetuous speed, and swiftly formed in ranks of war. Horns and trumpets sounded which roused all the soldiers into action.

The people at the town became pale with fear. They whispered about the approach of the enemy. No one had thought that such a sweet night would give way to such an awful morning. The Camerons who played an important role in the battle of Waterloo, played on their pipes, reminding the soldiers of the great deeds of their ancestors like Sir Evan, and his son Donald. These soldiers marched through the forest of Ardennes, and the poet reflects how the nature seems to shed tears over the soldiers, as the morning dew fell from above the leaves of the trees, who would never return home from the battlefield. These soldiers who were walking upon the grass, before evening, would be "trodden like the grass". These soldiers were inspired by fiery courage, and will

be overwhelmed by a common death, before the day is over. They would soon be buried under the earth and the grass would grow above them.

Last stanza of the poem reflects on the transitoriness of human life, and fickleness of fate. The previous evening, they were dancing vigorously in the party. Later they were soon preparing and getting ready in their uniforms for their battle early morning. The dark clouds of the battle surrounded the soldiers. Finally, at the end of the day, we find the earth covered with heaps of dead bodies, of thousands of men. The soldiers have lost their identities. Bodies of the soldiers, friends and enemies, the horses, all lay in “one red burial blent”. Buried in one heap, they were covered in blood and soil. Death, the greatest leveller, gave no one individual identities on the battlefield. Everybody has accorded the same kind of treatment. Through the poem, Byron wants to send a message that no war can be justified. War is something that begins with a man’s ambition but ends with the destruction on all sides. Thousands lose their lives and their homes, thousands go astray. There is no glory on war, but only death and destruction.

It should be remembered that when Byron wrote these lines on Waterloo, a great battle was an event of recent memory. These lines are derived almost entirely from the cynical, pessimistic attitude, that the poet took up in all matters. The impermanence of things, always made a deep impression on Byron. He contemplates in his poem, the passing show of things, and their utter meaninglessness. Byron thought of those who were killed in battles without serving a great purpose. the selfishness of kings, and the vices of men, have been criticized in this poem. Though some critics say that he had great admiration for Napoleon's accomplishments and visions, he does not forget the soldiers marching towards death and glory.