

A Beach Day

By Holly Dunlea

I watch the sea grass dance a tango with the wind
as the waves jump and roll with the tide.
The dawn,
a welcome grey after stormy days,
5 opens up to a morning of possibilities.
I stare at a spider as it crawls up a wall.
Her web is intricate, delicate, vulnerable.

I look beyond my weapon.
I look past the sand and grasses—
10 past the barbed wire
past our Riegel crop
past the ocean waves rolling onto the beach.
The horizon stretches before me. I flinch—
a nation's flotilla discolors the sea.
15 Landing crafts spill out of carriers like bees from a hive.
I scan the waters—the world's navy approaches.

My body shivers with the sight of aircraft—
Planes swarm toward the coast.
My stomach aches with dread.
20 A deep breath settles the butterflies.
Our Flak: our 105s, our 88s, will deafen this otherwise docile cliff;
Their sea attack will assail the ledges,
rending the grass from its roots,
leaving sand craters to be filled with sea salt.

25 My eyes are on the sky as I watch more,
more planes than I have ever seen—an acridid invasion.
The distant roar penetrates my limbs. A matter of minutes.
Minutes to prepare, to load, to fortify, to sweat.
The Marauders' drone is deafening.
30 My focus shifts back to the channel.
I shudder with perturbation.
A comrade vomits.
He has grasped the enormity of our location.
He held onto orders to return to Calais.
35 My hands, cold and wet, grip my Schmeisser.
Droplets of sweat run down my forehead and sting my eyes—
My mouth is dry.
I refuse to move, to relinquish my spot to a comrade.
A spider crawls into a hole in the concrete.
40 "Feuern! Feuern! Feuern!"

The landing craft disgorge their contents.
Low tide makes my targets too distant for accuracy.
I watch the enemy pour out of landing craft
like ants from a newly opened nest.
45 Their weaponry mocks me.
Their Jeeps dive into the surf, submerge,
then smirk while riding the tide.

Tanks sink. Good.
Closer to my range,
50 Americans scramble in the sand while
the cacophony of mortars, Flak, bombs, screams
turn our concrete cocoon into an echo chamber.
Sand erupts like geysers into our faces.
Fountains of salty spray explode
55 in the enemy lines
obliterating our view of incoming targets.
We suffer from tunnel vision but continue
successfully to bombard the enemy.
The spider may crawl into its hole,
60 but I refuse to move.
Heil Hitler.

“A Beach Day” and WWII D-Day: lessons

Literary Questions:

1. Where is the irony in “A Beach Day?” What type of irony is it? Explain.
2. From what point of view is the story told?
3. Find two examples of imagery. What tone is the author conveying through those images? What is the author implying about the battle?
4. What style of poem is “A Beach Day?”
5. Find the similes in the poem. Why did the author use those comparisons?
6. Look for symbolism in the poem.
What is the web? Who is the spider?
Of what are the acridids symbolic?
7. What is the meaning of the soldier’s nerves in lines 32-33? Why is the line “I will not move” repeated, and what does it mean? To what beach do you think the author is referring in the poem? What was the outcome of the beach invasions?
8. After researching conditions aboard D-Day ships, write a narrative essay depicting a sailor’s experience.
9. Read Randall Jarrell’s poem “Losses.” Connect to “Beach Day” and discuss as a class.

Further Discussion and Activities:

1. Do some math! Look up statistics on the Allies’ planes: sorties, number of bombs they carry, number of bombers involved in the battle.
2. What does “D-Day plus one” mean?
3. Who planned the Normandy invasion and how was it carried out? Where in the poem does the author refer to the plans for the operations?
4. What weapons did the Germans use?
5. Read Winston Churchill’s speech to the House of Commons on June 6, 1944. Annotate for key points, then write a ½ page summary of the speech.
6. Watch the opening half hour of Saving Private Ryan. Write a compare and contrast essay on the German and American perspectives shown in the movie and poem.

Vocabulary: Flak, acridid, perturbation, flotilla, disgorge, cacophony

Literary Devices: symbolism, simile, foreshadowing, personification,
imagery, free verse, situational irony

“A Beach Day” and WWII D-Day: answers

Literary Questions:

1. Dramatic irony is present in the title and the first stanza, because the reader is misled into thinking the poem is about a casual day at the beach, but the poem is about war.
2. A German soldier is telling this story.
3. Many images in the poem. Most show the horror of the speaker’s experience, but all imply the speaker is facing a hopeless situation.
4. “A Beach Day” is a free verse poem.
5. Similes: lines 15, 44, 53
6. The spider represents Hitler issuing orders to the troops then crawling into his bunker for safety. The web is the German army’s path of destruction that first caught its enemies off guard and vulnerable, but then began to break under the weight of war, just like a spider’s web in violent weather. The acridids are the American troops that swarmed over the beach like locusts.
7. The comrade did not follow orders and go to Calais, because Calais is where the Germans thought the invasion was going to occur. “I will not move” shows the speaker’s fortitude. The Normandy beach invasion at Omaha Beach, the last beach to be taken.
8. Answers will vary.

Further Discussion and Activities:

1. Facts can be found on the Internet.
2. D-Day was supposed to be June 5, 1944, but bad weather forced the Allies to delay the landing for one day.
3. See history texts and the Internet for the plans and people involved. The poem refers to these plans in lines 15-18, 25-26, 34, 43, 46.
4. The German weapons are involved lines 10-22, 21, 52, 57.