

**Background** Though Ray Bradbury (1920–2012) is best known as a science fiction writer, he's also written plays, mysteries, fantasies, realistic stories, and novels. In this story, Bradbury tells about a drummer boy on the night before the Battle of Shiloh in the Civil War. This two-day battle began on April 6, 1862, near the southwestern Tennessee church from which the bloody clash takes its name. More than 23,000 soldiers died during those two days. At that time, it was the bloodiest battle in American history.



# The Drummer Boy of Shiloh

Historical Fiction by Ray Bradbury

**SETTING A PURPOSE** As you read, pay attention to the details the author provides about the scene of the battle and about the men who were preparing to fight. What do the details suggest about the realities of war?

In the April night, more than once, blossoms fell from the orchard trees and lit with rustling taps on the drumskin. At midnight a peach stone left miraculously on a branch through winter, flicked by a bird, fell swift and unseen, struck once, like panic, which jerked the boy upright. In silence he listened to his own heart ruffle away, away, at last gone from his ears and back in his chest again.

After that, he turned the drum on its side, where its great lunar<sup>1</sup> face peered at him whenever he opened his eyes.

10 His face, alert or at rest, was **solemn**. It was indeed a solemn time and a solemn night for a boy just turned fourteen in the peach field near the Owl Creek not far from the church at Shiloh.

**solemn**  
(sə'l'əm) *adj.* If an event is **solemn**, it is deeply serious.

<sup>1</sup> **lunar** (loo'när): of or relating to the moon.



"... thirty-one, thirty-two, thirty-three ..."

Unable to see, he stopped counting.

Beyond the thirty-three familiar shadows, forty thousand men, exhausted by nervous expectation, unable to sleep for romantic dreams of battles yet unfought, lay crazily askew in their uniforms. A mile yet farther on, another army was  
20 strewn helter-skelter, turning slow, basting themselves with the thought of what they would do when the time came: a leap, a yell, a blind plunge their strategy, raw youth their protection and benediction.<sup>2</sup>

Now and again the boy heard a vast wind come up, that gently stirred the air. But he knew what it was, the army here, the army there, whispering to itself in the dark. Some men talking to others, others murmuring to themselves, and all so quiet it was like a natural element arisen from south or north with the motion of the earth toward dawn.

30 What the men whispered the boy could only guess, and he guessed that it was: Me, I'm the one, I'm the one of all the rest won't die. I'll live through it. I'll go home. The band will play. And I'll be there to hear it.

Yes, thought the boy, that's all very well for them, they can give as good as they get!

For with the careless bones of the young men harvested by night and bindled<sup>3</sup> around campfires were the similarly strewn steel bones of their rifles, with bayonets fixed like eternal lightning lost in the orchard grass.

40 Me, thought the boy, I got only a drum, two sticks to beat it, and no shield.

There wasn't a man-boy on this ground tonight did not have a shield he cast, riveted or carved himself on his way to his first attack, compounded of remote but nonetheless firm and fiery family devotion, flag-blown patriotism and cocksure immortality strengthened by the touchstone of very real gunpowder, ramrod, minnieball and flint.<sup>4</sup> But without these last the boy felt his family move yet farther off away in the dark, as if one of those great prairie-burning trains had  
50 chanted them away never to return, leaving him with this drum which was worse than a toy in the game to be played tomorrow or some day much too soon.

<sup>2</sup> **benediction** (bĕn'ĭ-dĭk'shən): a blessing.

<sup>3</sup> **bindled**: fastened or wrapped by encircling, as with a belt.

<sup>4</sup> **ramrod, minnieball, and flint**: items used to fire a rifle.

**askew** (ə-skə'w)   
When something   
askew, it is off cen

**strew**   
(strō) v. If you st   
something, you   
spread it here and   
there, or scatter it



The boy turned on his side. A moth brushed his face, but it was peach blossom. A peach blossom flicked him, but it was a moth. Nothing stayed put. Nothing had a name. Nothing was as it once was.

If he lay very still, when the dawn came up and the soldiers put on their bravery with their caps, perhaps they might go away, the war with them, and not notice him lying small here, no more than a toy himself.

"Well, by God, now," said a voice.

The boy shut up his eyes, to hide inside himself, but it was too late. Someone, walking by in the night, stood over him.

"Well," said the voice quietly, "here's a soldier crying *before* the fight. Good. Get it over. Won't be time once it all starts."

And the voice was about to move on when the boy, startled, touched the drum at his elbow. The man above, hearing this, stopped. The boy could feel his eyes, sense him slowly bending near. A hand must have come down out of the night, for there was a little rat-tat as the fingernails brushed and the man's breath fanned his face.

"Why, it's the drummer boy, isn't it?"

The boy nodded, not knowing if his nod was seen. "Sir, is that you?" he said.

"I assume it is." The man's knees cracked as he bent still closer.

He smelled as all fathers should smell, of salt sweat, ginger tobacco, horse and boot leather, and the earth he walked upon. He had many eyes. No, not eyes, brass buttons that watched the boy.

He could only be, and was, the General.

"What's your name, boy?" he asked.

"Joby," whispered the boy, starting to sit up.

"All right, Joby, don't stir." A hand pressed his chest gently, and the boy relaxed. "How long you been with us, Joby?"

"Three weeks, sir."

"Run off from home or joined **legitimately**, boy?"

Silence.

"Damn-fool question," said the General. "Do you shave yet, boy? Even more of a damn-fool. There's your cheek, fell right off the tree overhead. And the others here not much older. Raw, raw, damn raw, the lot of you. You ready for tomorrow or the next day, Joby?"

"I think so, sir."

**legitimately**

(lə-jīt 'ə-mīt-lē) *adv.*

When you do

something

*legitimately*, you do it

lawfully.



"You want to cry some more, go on ahead. I did the same last night."

"You, sir?"

"God's truth. Thinking of everything ahead. Both sides figuring the other side will just give up, and soon, and the war done in weeks, and us all home. Well, that's not how it's going to be. And maybe that's why I cried."

"Yes, sir," said Joby.

The General must have taken out a cigar now, for the dark was suddenly filled with the Indian smell of tobacco unlit as yet, but chewed as the man thought what next to say.

"It's going to be a crazy time," said the General. "Counting both sides, there's a hundred thousand men, give or take a few thousand out there tonight, not one as can spit a sparrow off a tree, or knows a horse clod from a minnieball. Stand up, bare the breast, ask to be a target, thank them and sit down, that's us, that's them. We should turn tail and train four months, they should do the same. But here we are, taken with spring fever and thinking it blood lust, taking our sulphur with cannons instead of with molasses<sup>5</sup> as it should be, going to be a hero, going to live forever. And I can see all of them over there nodding agreement, save the other way around. It's wrong, boy, it's wrong as a head put on hind side front and a man marching backward through life. It will be a double massacre if one of their itchy generals decides to picnic his lads on our grass. More innocents will get shot out of pure Cherokee enthusiasm than ever got shot before. Owl Creek was full of boys splashing around in the noonday sun just a few hours ago. I fear it will be full of boys again, just floating, at sundown tomorrow, not caring where the tide takes them."

The General stopped and made a little pile of winter leaves and twigs in the darkness, as if he might at any moment strike fire to them to see his way through the coming days when the sun might not show its face because of what was happening here and just beyond.

The boy watched the hand stirring the leaves and opened his lips to say something, but did not say it. The General heard the boy's breath and spoke himself.

<sup>5</sup> taking our sulphur with cannons instead of with molasses: sulphur was an ingredient in gunpowder that was used to fire cannons; at that time sulphur was also used as a tonic or medical treatment. Molasses is a thick, brown syrup, used to mask the unpleasant taste of medicines.



“Why am I telling you this? That’s what you wanted to ask, eh? Well, when you got a bunch of wild horses on a loose rein somewhere, somehow you got to bring order, rein them in. These lads, fresh out of the milkshed, don’t know what I know, and I can’t tell them: men actually die, in war. So each is his own army. I got to make *one* army of them. And for that, boy, I need you.”

“Me!” The boy’s lips barely twitched.

“Now, boy,” said the General quietly, “you are the heart of the army. Think of that. You’re the heart of the army. Listen, now.”

And, lying there, Joby listened.

And the General spoke on.

If he, Joby, beat slow tomorrow, the heart would beat slow in the men. They would lag by the wayside.<sup>6</sup> They would drowse in the fields on their muskets. They would sleep

**“You’re the heart  
of the army.”**

forever, after that, in those same fields, their hearts slowed by a drummer boy and stopped by enemy lead.

But if he beat a sure, steady, ever faster rhythm, then, then their knees would come up in a long line down over that hill, one knee after the other, like a wave on the ocean shore! Had he seen the ocean ever? Seen the waves rolling in like a well-ordered cavalry charge to the sand? Well, that was it, that’s what he wanted, that’s what was needed! Joby was his right hand and his left. He gave the orders, but Joby set the pace!

So bring the right knee up and the right foot out and the left knee up and the left foot out. One following the other in good time, in brisk time. Move the blood up the body and make the head proud and the spine stiff and the jaw **resolute**. Focus the eye and set the teeth, flare the nostrils and tighten the hands, put steel armor all over the men, for blood moving fast in them does indeed make men feel as if they’d put on steel. He must keep at it, at it! Long and steady, steady and long! Then, even though shot or torn, those wounds got in hot blood—in blood he’d helped

**resolute**  
(rĕz’ə-lōot’) *adj.*  
If you are *resolute*,  
you are firm or  
determined.

<sup>6</sup> lag by the wayside: fall behind.



stir—would feel less pain. If their blood was cold, it would be more than slaughter, it would be murderous nightmare and pain best not told and no one to guess.

170 The General spoke and stopped, letting his breath slack off. Then, after a moment, he said, "So there you are, that's it. Will you do that, boy? Do you know now you're general of the army when the General's left behind?"

The boy nodded mutely.

"You'll run them through for me then, boy?"

"Yes, sir."

180 "Good. And, God willing, many nights from tonight, many years from now, when you're as old or far much older than me, when they ask you what you did in this awful time, you will tell them—one part humble and one part proud—'I was the drummer boy at the battle of Owl Creek,' or the Tennessee River, or maybe they'll just name it after the church there. 'I was the drummer boy at Shiloh.' Good grief, that has a beat and sound to it fitting for Mr. Longfellow. 'I was the drummer boy at Shiloh.' Who will ever hear those words and not know you, boy, or what you thought this night, or what you'll think tomorrow or the next day when we must get up on our legs and *move!*"

190 The general stood up. "Well, then. God bless you, boy. Good night."

"Good night, sir."

And, tobacco, brass, boot polish, salt sweat and leather, the man moved away through the grass.

Joby lay for a moment, staring but unable to see where the man had gone.

He swallowed. He wiped his eyes. He cleared his throat. He settled himself. Then, at last, very slowly and firmly, he turned the drum so that it faced up toward the sky.

200 He lay next to it, his arm around it, feeling the tremor, the touch, the **muted** thunder as, all the rest of the April night in the year 1862, near the Tennessee River, not far from the Owl Creek, very close to the church named Shiloh, the peach blossoms fell on the drum.

**muted**

(myōō'tid) adj. When something is muted, it is softened or muffled.

**COLLABORATIVE DISCUSSION** Do you think the drummer boy regretted his decision to become part of the Army once he begins to realize what war is like? With a partner, discuss your impressions of him and the choice that he made. Cite specific evidence from the text to support your ideas.



## Analyze Stories: Historical Fiction

8.RL.1.2, 8.RL.1.3

Every story has a **setting**, the time and place in which the action occurs. In historical fiction such as "The Drummer Boy of Shiloh," the setting is usually a key aspect of the work.

**Historical fiction** refers to stories that are set in the past and include real places and events from the time period. Like other works of historical fiction, Ray Bradbury's story involves characters that may be based on real people, plot developments that reflect real events, and details that are historically accurate. Sometimes, you may not know whether elements of a work of historical fiction are based on something real unless you do some research.

Review "The Drummer Boy of Shiloh" for additional examples of historical details and references to actual events.

## Determine Meanings of Words and Phrases

8.RL.2.4

When you get a general sense of anxiety, sadness, giddiness, or some other emotion as you read a story, you are responding to the work's **mood**, the feeling or atmosphere that the writer creates for readers. Various elements work together to contribute to a story's mood.

### Elements

**Setting**, where and when the events take place

**Imagery**, language that appeals to the five senses

**Symbol**, a person, place, object, or activity that stands for something beyond itself

**Allusion**, or reference to a famous person, place, event, or work of literature

### How they create mood

The writer's choice of setting and the words he or she uses to describe it can create a mood.

What we see, hear, or otherwise sense can make us feel frightened, cheerful, or many other things.

The emotions evoked by a symbol or what happens to it can affect the overall feeling of a piece. For example, a wounded bird might contribute to a mood of vulnerability.

An allusion to a serious person can help set a somber mood, just as an allusion to a fanciful place can contribute to a whimsical mood.

Notice the author's use of symbols and allusions to create the mood as you analyze "The Drummer Boy of Shiloh."



## Analyzing the Text

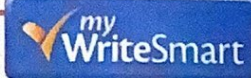
**Cite Text Evidence** Support your responses with evidence from the text.

1. **Analyze** In the description of the setting in lines 24–26, what does the special wind suggest about the locations of the two armies? Identify what mood this description helps create.
2. **Cite Evidence** What are the descriptive details that the author provides about the General in lines 77–80 that help make this historical fiction accurate for its time? What is the effect of providing these details?
3. **Interpret** Why does the General refer to the pace of the boy's drumming as "the heart of the army" in lines 141–157?
4. **Analyze** Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was a popular American author who wrote "Paul Revere's Ride" and other works immortalizing early American history. Identify the allusion to him in lines 177–188. What mood does this allusion help create in the last paragraph?
5. **Compare** What is the similarity between the General's talk with the drummer boy and the drummer boy's role in the next day's battle?
6. **Analyze** What do the peach blossoms symbolize in this story? Explain how this symbol contributes to the overall mood.

## Speaking and Listening

Working with a partner, act out the scene in which the General discusses the boy's fears and his role in the coming battle. Prepare by discussing the General's motivation for the conversation and how that might affect the way the General speaks.

### PERFORMANCE TASK



**Respond by Speaking** Research the Battle of Shiloh, including the legend of the drummer boy. Find out how many people died and how the significance of the battle is viewed today. Discuss whether your reaction

to the following parts of the story has changed as a result of your research:

- lines 98–101
- lines 106–124
- lines 151–157
- lines 181–190