Suicide in the Trenches

POEM TEXT

I knew a simple soldier boy
Who grinned at life in empty joy,
Slept soundly through the lonesome dark,
And whistled early with the lark.

In winter trenches, cowed and glum,
With crumps and lice and lack of rum,
He put a bullet through his brain.
No one spoke of him again.

You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye
Who cheer when soldier lads march by,
Sneak home and pray you'll never know
The hell where youth and laughter go.

SUMMARY

I knew an innocent young man who became a soldier. This young man had a happy, carefree life. He used to sleep peacefully all through the dark, empty night, and he would rise cheerfully in the morning, whistling along with the birds.

At war, he became depressed and scared. Driven to despair by the relentless explosions of the shells, insect bites, and lack of alcohol, he shot himself in the head. After that, he was quickly forgotten.

All you self-satisfied people back at home have fire in your eyes as you applaud young soldiers marching through the streets. After the soldiers pass, go scurry back home and hope to God you'll never have to experience the hell that is war, which destroys all joy and innocence.

THEMES

THE TRAGEDY AND HORROR OF WAR

Siegfried Sassoon's "Suicide in the Trenches" takes a bold and unflinching look at the horror of war, specifically the First World War (1914-1918). The poem focuses on one "simple soldier" who, in his ordinariness, stands in for millions of other young men. Torn from what would have been a typical life of "youth and laughter," Sassoon's "boy" is quickly overwhelmed by the grim realities of warfare and, in utter despair, shoots himself through the head.

The poem contrasts this direct experience of war—and the tragedy of the young man's suicide—with the "smug-faced crowds" who line the streets to "cheer [...] soldier lads" (and, in turn, implicitly encourage the cycle of violence and waste of life). In this poem, "hell" is not a far-off concept—but a reality on earth during war.

Sassoon begins by sketching a picture of the soldier's innocent youthfulness prior to his experience of war. The second stanza then places the reader in the trenches themselves, the site of the suicide—while the third stanza functions as a warning to those back at home who know nothing of what it's like to fight in such a horrific conflict.

The poem portrays its main character as a typical young man. He was "simple," and "grinned at life in empty joy." He would sleep well through the night and whistle with the birds in the morning. In other words, this young man was just fine before war came along. Indeed, the First World War exploited that youthful enthusiasm for life by making out that the war was some kind of exciting adventure (a lie that Sassoon worked hard to expose through his poetry).

Soon enough, the reality of war takes over, and all it takes is a few details for the poem to convey the mind-warping cruelty and hardship of the conflict. The young man becomes depressed by what he's seen, his once peaceful sleeping now ruined by "crumps" (the sounds of explosions) and lice (maddening little insects that feed on human blood). The poem thus tries to give the reader a small glimpse into the mental strain of warfare (which contrasts with the unthinking patriotism of those back at home in the third stanza).

The young man then abruptly shoots himself in the trenches, driven to suicide by his horrific experiences. Death then, is presented as preferably to the living hell that is war. What's more, this suicide takes place with a remarkable lack of ceremony—the young man matter-of-factly "put[s] a bullet through his brain," utterly alone and hopeless.

Furthermore, there is no time or space to grieve for him, because the war goes on. The young man's suicide thus echoes with all the untold tragedies of war, the poem subtly asking the reader to imagine how many young lives ended similarly, their stories long forgotten. The soldier dies, and is never spoken of again.

Finally, the poem shifts its focus back onto those at home (in this case, the U.K.). Here, crowds applaud young men going off to war, unintentionally and unthinkingly encouraging this waste of life to continue. There is also a kind of hypocrisy at play in the way that the patriotic public are willing for these young men to die, but they *themselves* don't have direct experience of what

these young men are signing up for.

There is nothing to celebrate about war, argues the poem—and the speaker hopes that those naively cheering back at home never have to learn what it's like to be there first-hand. War is a kind of hell where "youth and laughter" go to die, where innocence itself is slaughtered without mercy.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

I knew a simple soldier boy
Who grinned at life in empty joy,

The reader knows before the poem even begins that something terrible is going to happen, thanks to the title. The poem then opens by immediately centering on the "simple soldier boy" and uses the past tense "knew," casting a dark cloud on all the follows.

At first, though, the tone is light and the rhythm jaunty. This reflects the fact that "simple soldier boy" probably signed up for the war with a degree of excitement and anticipation, unaware of the true horrors that were to come. The clear alliteration of the phrase ("simple soldier") emphasizes his innocence and simplicity, adding a sense of lighthearted musicality. The choice of the word "boy" rather than "man" also reminds the reader that this soldier is young.

Indeed, he's probably not seen much yet in his life—which is why he used to "grin at life in empty joy." This implies that his life before the war was a kind of blissful ignorance, more like what life *should* be for young people.

The enjambment between these two lines flows naturally and easily, reinforcing this picture of pre-war life. But it's interesting that the speaker describes this pre-war happens as specifically "empty joy." Perhaps it was empty because it was missing something fundamental about human life itself—the sheer horrors which humanity is capable of inflicting upon its own kind.

The sound of these two lines reinforce the poem's lighthearted tone, which is at odds with the feeling of dread created by the title. These lines are written in iambic tetrameter, meaning there are four poetic feet with a da-DUM rhythm per line:

I knew a simple soldier boy
Who grinned at life in empty joy,

The clear end rhymes here between "boy" and "joy" add to the sense of ease, making the poem sound so far like a simple nursery rhyme.

LINES 3-4

Slept soundly through the lonesome dark,
And whistled early with the lark.

The rest of the second stanza builds on the opening lines' portrayal of the innocent young "soldier boy" and his naively joyful pre-war life. In fact, the whole stanza is one long sentence, suggesting the *uninterrupted* contentment of the boy's youth before he went to war.

In lines 3 and 4, the poem focuses on the boy's pre-war sleeping habits. Echoing the /s/ alliteration of "simple soldier boy," line 3 tells the reader how the boy once "slept soundly through the lonesome dark." The sibilance here (continued by the /s/ sound in "lonesome") makes the line that feel sleepy and peaceful.

The mention of sleep brings attention to the boy's psychological state, allowing for a later contrast between his pre-war and mid-war mentality. For now, he sleeps well and wakes up alert and ready for the day. Later he will likely be faced with a *lack* of sleep in war, due to the incessant and overwhelming sounds of war (shells flying overhead machine-gun fire, and so on). When he's at war, the boy will no longer sleep "soundly," and the dark will be full of threat and danger (not "lonesome" at all).

Line 4 ties in with the discussion of sleep. When he could sleep well, the "simple soldier boy" would wake with a spring in his step, "whistle[ing] early with the lark." A lark is a small brown bird a distinctive song that is traditionally associated with the English countryside (and, therefore, with more peaceful times back home). This again builds a picture of an innocent young pre-war life, while subtly foreshadowing the terrible sound of explosive shells whistling over the trenches.

Also notice how the end-stop at the end of line 4 seems to put a sudden end to this previous life, creating a tension between the first stanza and the approaching tragedy suggested by the poem's title.

Finally, these lines continue the poem's use of steady iambic tetrameter. The rhyme scheme is show to be AABB, with "dark" and "lark" serving as another pair of clear, full end rhymes. The structure of the poem thus remains simple and bouncy.

LINES 5-8

In winter trenches, cowed and glum,
With crumps and lice and lack of rum,
He put a bullet through his brain.
No one spoke of him again.

In the second stanza, the poem shifts dramatically from the boy's innocent pre-war life to his experiences in the First World War trenches. Trench warfare, in which soldiers occupy long ditches, was a key aspect of WWI. The trenches were terrible places to exist—cold, damp, diseased, and full of the

decomposing bodies (and body parts) of fellow soldiers. In this stanza, Sassoon paints a picture of the despair and misery of life in the trenches. In just a few small details, the poem conjures up a very bleak world.

The young soldier, torn from his innocent youthful life and thrust into these disease-ridden trenches during the coldest months of the year, becomes "cowed and glum." "Cowed" means he has been intimidated into defeat—which likely relates to his own psychology more so than the overall war effort itself. He is "glum" because his war experiences have made him depressed—the things he's seen, the lack of sleep, the cold, the fear of imminent death and so on.

In line 6, the poem uses polysydenton to show the relentless misery of the war:

> With crumps and lice and lack of rum,

Notice how, combined with the "and" in line 5, the rhythm of the poem gives the reader an impression of the ongoing brutality of warfare, as though each stressed syllable ("With crumps and lice and lack of rum,") were pummeling the reader themselves into submission.

The consonant sounds in this line—the hard /k/ and /l/ sounds—also have something sickeningly unpleasant about them, like a hissing crunch. The boy is being driven mad by the sound of exploding shells ("crumps") and the incessant itch of little insects.

Soldiers were often plied with alcohol to numb them to their awful situation, but here the "rum" has run out. The boy's willingness to live, too, has run dry—death seems the preferred option. There are many accounts of similar suicides from the war. Wounded soldiers would also sometimes plead with their comrades to put them out of their pain and misery.

Line 7 marks the moment that the young soldier commits suicide, and this is made all the more powerful by the way the poem has delayed the event. Sassoon does not romanticize the death, or even emphasize its tragedy, allowing the stark bleakness of the act to speak for itself. The poem is matter-of-fact in tone:

> He put a bullet through his brain.

The two alliterating /b/ sounds hint at the violence of the young man's decision, two plosive sounds echoing the effect of a bullet on the surrounding air. As with line 4, end-stopping is used to create a sense of dramatic finality, emphasizing the fact there is no way of undoing this act.

Line 8 makes the wider tragedy clear—the boy's suicide is *more* tragic because it is unremarkable, a mere fact of wartime existence. No one speaks about him again not because his suicide isn't heartbreaking, but because there's no time to dwell on it, and because events like that happened all the time during WWI.

The line also suggests that the boy's sacrifice itself is forgotten, with a clear contrast developed in the final stanza between the horrible lived experiences of war and the unthinking jingoistic pride back home.

LINES 9-12

> *You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye*
> *Who cheer when soldier lads march by,*
> *Sneak home and pray you'll never know*
> *The hell where youth and laughter go.*

The third stanza is addressed to the "smug-faced crowds" back at home, the public who "cheer when soldier lads march by" but know little of the horrors that these young men face in reality. This, in essence, was Sassoon's mission—to cut through the propaganda surrounding the war and provide a more authentic account (and critique) of what was really happening.

Especially in the beginning, the war was sometimes glorified and romanticized, and young men were convinced that going to fight was essentially the adventure of a lifetime. The "You" of line 9 can be read as aimed at both those who spread this kind of misinformation *and* those who bought into it unthinkingly (see poems such as "Who's for the Game?" Jessie Pope for the kind of nationalistic messaging that Sassoon had in mind). The poem accuses members of the public of being complicit in this young man's suicide, though they don't necessarily realize this contribution that they make.

The poem's one metaphor—"kindling eye"—highlights the way that public support for the war perpetuates its waste of youthful life. (This isn't to say that Sassoon was completely against the war, but more that he wanted to highlight the tragic flaws in the way in which it was being fought and reported.) "Kindling" is the material used for starting a fire (usually small pieces of wood). The poem thus suggests that the fiery "hell" of war is in part set ablaze by the attitudes towards the war in the home country.

Though the war seems faraway and distant to the public, those "crowds" back home are nevertheless a part of it. Notice how the /d/ consonance in this line is delicate but purposeful, mimicking the kindling itself (a fire started with a few twigs could bring down an entire forest):

> You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye

The sibilance, also highlighted, gently suggest the hissing sound of a small fire. There is an emptiness to the enthusiasm of these cheering crowds that perhaps harks back to the "empty joy" mentioned in line 2.

The poem's last two lines are ambiguous in terms of grammar. That is, it's not clear if the poem uses "Sneak" as imperative

verb—*instructing* the "smug-faced crowds" to "sneak home and pray"—or as an *observation* of general behavior. Indeed, perhaps it could be read as both. Either way, it's clear that the cheering public would rather not "know / The hell where youth and laughter go" (who would?), and perhaps the poem doesn't wish that kind of terrible knowledge on them either, despite the way they haphazardly support the horrors of war.

The mention of prayer here is significant. Think about how religion is linked to the transition between life and death, and how prayer has for many centuries been an important part of the death ritual (the way that people confront imminent death when sick). No such solace is available to the suicidal soldier, who is utterly alone and beyond the reach of religious promises or comfort.

The Western Front, where Sassoon himself fought, was often described as a kind of "hell." It is a place where "youth" and youthful happiness ("laughter") go to die, and a stark contrast to the romanticized vision of war. Ultimately, then, the poem is a kind of fable and a warning, criticizing both war itself and those who give war their uncritical support.

SYMBOLS

THE LARK

A lark is a small brown bird with a beautiful song. As part of the poem's description of the young man's pre-war life, he is depicted as an early riser, someone who "whistled early with the lark." In other words, he was carefree and happy and, indeed, his youthful companionship with the lark bird suggests that he enjoyed a kind of freedom (like a bird in flight).

The lark is often associated with the British countryside, which might as well be another planet compared to the trenches of the Western Front (long ditches dug in Western Europe that were the site of much of WW1 combat). The mention of whistling also suggests the more menacing whistling sound of bombs flying overhead. The lark, then, represents the soldier's pre-war innocence, a time when he could sleep the whole night and wake up full of energy.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "And whistled early with the lark."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"Suicide in the Trenches" uses alliteration throughout its three stanzas, lending the poem a musical, sing-song quality that contrasts with the darkness of its subject.

The first example of alliteration is in line 1: "simple soldier boy." The two /s/ sounds give the phrase a simple, memorable quality. It's an almost child-like use of alliteration that helps build a picture of the soldier—who is the suicide victim mentioned in the title—as an innocent youth (hardly ready for the kind of horrors that WWI has to offer).

This alliteration is then echoed in line 3's "slept soundly," describing how the soldier used to sleep easily through the night. Together, these /s/ sounds (which are specifically sibilance) also gently evoke the sound of snoring. The whole point, of course, is to contrast the young man's calm, innocent life prior to the war with the horrors of serving in the conflict (including the insomnia).

Alliteration is then used in the second stanza (lines 5-7 specifically):

> In winter trenches, cowed and glum,
> With crumps and lice and lack of rum,
> He put a bullet through his brain.

There's something intentionally unpleasant about the sounds in the first two lines here—the /k/ and /l/ alliteration are almost like little insects sticking to the poem's text. They also set up the dramatic alliteration in line 7. Here, "bullet" and "brain" have a harsh and violent sound evoking the suddenness of the soldier's suicidal shot. The harshness of the plosive /b/ sounds contributes to the way that this event appears in the poem completely unromantic or dressed-up—the act of suicide could hardly be put more starkly. This shocks the reader, especially given the innocent descriptions of the first stanza that set this moment up.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "simple soldier"
- **Line 3:** "Slept soundly"
- **Line 5:** "cowed"
- **Line 6:** "crumps," "lice," "lack"
- **Line 7:** "bullet," "brain"
- **Line 9:** "crowds," "kindling"
- **Line 11:** "never know"

CONSONANCE

Consonance is used in "Suicide in the Trenches" similarly to alliteration, working alongside the poem's steady rhyme scheme and meter to create a pleasing musical quality throughout. The poem is memorable in part because of its sound, which creates a rather light-hearted atmosphere that contrasts with the horror being described. On the surface the poem sounds pretty and pleasant, which reflects the romanticization of war as some grand adventure. Beneath the

surface though, on the level of meaning and not sound, the poem is horrifying.

Consonance also can subtly draw readers' attention to certain important images. Take, for example, the consonance of /s/ and /l/ sounds in lines 4-5:

> Slept soundly through the lonesome dark,
> And whistled early with the lark.

Notice how these /s/ sounds have a whistling quality (this type of consonance is also known as sibilance). The whistling sound in turn evokes three things: sleeping (as in snoring/breathing sounds), the young soldier's carefree whistling in his pre-war life, and the whistling sound of bombs flying overhead. The gentle, playful /l/ sounds highlighted above also evoke the boy's previous youthful innocence.

Consonance then forms an important part of the second stanza:

> In winter trenches, cowed and glum,
> With crumps and lice and lack of rum,

The consonant sounds here have a slightly sickening, queasy sound. The hard /k/ sounds, for example, are almost like insects sticking to the line. Using consonance in this way creates a vivid picture of the deeply unpleasant experience of daily life in the trenches.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "simple soldier"
- **Line 3:** "Slept soundly," "lonesome"
- **Line 4:** "whistled," "early," "lark"
- **Line 5:** "In winter trenches, cowed and glum"
- **Line 6:** "crumps," "lice," "lack," "rum"
- **Line 7:** "bullet," "brain"
- **Line 8:** "No one," "again"
- **Line 9:** "smug-faced crowds," "kindling"
- **Line 10:** "soldier lads"
- **Line 11:** "Sneak," "never know"
- **Line 12:** "hell," "laughter"

END-STOPPED LINE

End-stopping is used to powerful effect in "Suicide in the Trenches." The poem is mostly end-stopped, as a matter of fact, which adds to its straightforward, detached tone. The speaker seems quite in control of the lines, with any emotion kept in check rather than spilling across the line breaks. This detachment is add odds with the horrible subject at hand, create a sense of uneasy tension throughout the poem.

End-stop also adds drama at the right moments. Take line 4, which ends the first stanza with a firm period:

> And whistled early with the lark.

Line 1 is enjambed, and lines 2-3 feature the softer pause of commas. The first three lines of the poem thus flow more easily, evoking the carefree (and long-gone) youthful innocence of the "simple soldier boy." The poem's rhythms and sounds occur without anything strongly in their way—until, that is, the full stop after "lark." Combined with the use of the past tense, this full-stop makes the boy's pre-war life suddenly distant. Indeed, the full stop creates an echoing, unsettling silence at the end of the stanza that contrasts with the way the soldier used to whistle happily in the morning. The *sound* of youthful happiness, in other words, has been abruptly stopped.

In the second stanza, there are two more full stops that work similarly:

> He put a bullet through his brain.
> No one spoke of him again.

The full-stop after "brain" makes this a dramatic moment in the poem. It's the poem's central event, and the pause that follows evokes the relative quiet that follows the loud gunshot. Likewise with line 8—the full-stop "again" echoes with the silence that surrounds the young man's life after he is quickly forgotten and never spoken of again.

The poem achieves a similar effect in the last line, the full-stop after "go" halting the poem's momentum. This is particularly effective given that the stanza has focused on movement in its mention of marching, and how war is essentially the "hell" to which youth goes to die (in other words, to be halted forever).

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "joy,"
- **Line 3:** "dark,"
- **Line 4:** "lark."
- **Line 5:** "glum,"
- **Line 6:** "rum,"
- **Line 7:** "brain."
- **Line 8:** "again."
- **Line 10:** "by,"
- **Line 12:** "go."

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is used throughout "Suicide in the Trenches," but it's a relatively minor feature. In part, enjambment serves to make the poem's end-stopping all the more dramatic and effective.

The first enjambment example is probably the most significant, and occurs between the first two lines:

> I knew a simple soldier boy

Who grinned at life in empty joy,

The first stanza constructs a vision of the young man's pre-war life, which was full of youthful innocence and happiness. In other words, it was a "simple" life—and the way that one line runs over into another supports this simplicity. It's as if the first line is uncomplicated by punctuation, and allowed to flow freely—just like the boy's life used to do.

The last stanza then uses enjambment twice:

You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye
Who cheer when soldier lads march by,
Sneak home and pray you'll never know
The hell where youth and laughter go.

The first of these enjambments means that line 10 also begins with the word "Who"—creating an implicit comparison between the carefree soldier who smiled at his life before heading off to war and the "smug-faced crowds" who cheer for soldiers on the sidelines.

The enjambment of this stanza also creates one long sentence balanced in two halves by the comma at the end of line 10. These lines, then, flow with relative freedom. Contrast this with the suddenness of the end-stopping in the second stanza. The passage that describes the suicide in the trenches itself has a more tense and constricted sound—while pre-war life and the lives of those who don't have to fight are described using a looser tone.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "boy / Who"
- **Lines 9-10:** "eye / Who"
- **Lines 11-12:** "know / The"

METAPHOR

For the most part, "Suicide in the Trenches" avoids the use of complex imagery or figurative language (similes, metaphors, and so on). Its power is in part *because* of its simplicity, which presents the horror of war starkly and without any romanticization. But the poem does use one metaphor, which appears in the first line of the final stanza:

You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye

This metaphor is an important part of the poem's moral argument. First, "kindling" refers to the small pieces of material (usually wood) that are used to start a fire. The kindling catches fire easily, creating a small fire that can in turn light the larger pieces of firewood (or other flammable material).

The speaker is thus accusing the crowds back home of having kindling in their eyes, essentially meaning that the "hell" of war—that fiery inferno of death and destruction—in part *starts* in the way that the public itself perceives the war. By trumping up the war and encouraging young "soldier lads" to sign up, the crowds are making a contribution to the continuation of that war. This criticism is more aimed at unthinking patriotism than at the war in its entirety. Sassoon, of course, knew well both the world "back home" and "the hell where youth and laughter go" to die (the war).

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "kindling eye"

POLYSYNDETON

Polysyndeton is used in the second stanza:

In winter trenches, cowed and glum,
With crumps and lice and lack of rum,

This repetition of "and" has a subtle but important effect on the poem. First, consider how the first stanza painted a picture of carefree youth. Now, the reader is brought into the "winter trenches," the place where the young soldier commits suicide. He is driven to this act by the horror of his combat experience—relentless bombing, insomnia, disease-ridden conditions, the cold and damp environment, and so on.

The use of polysydenton here creates a sense of the soldier's exasperated mental state. There is no let-up from the horrors of war, and the polysyndeton makes his experiences feel like a near-endless list of pain and misery. The paint a picture of a troubled mind for which death seems like a preferable kind of peace over enduring the war experience any further.

There is a secondary function to this polysyndeton. The "and[s]" help the poem maintain its iambic meter, adding unstressed syllables where necessary to keep the da-DUM pattern steady. This evokes the rhythm of marching, the evenness of the sound helping build the military setting. But importantly, it's also *tiring* to listen to iambs with little variation—an effect that Sassoon plays with here to evoke the soldier boy's fractured state of mind.

Where Polysyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "and"
- **Line 6:** "and," "and"

JUXTAPOSITION

There is a clear juxtaposition in the poem between the soldier's life before the war and his experience in the trenches. Back home, the young man is innocent and filled with joy; his life is free from weighty complications, and he is able to sleep peacefully through the quiet night. He wakes in the morning

feeling refreshed and ready for the day.

The "winter trenches" of the following stanza then present a horrifying shift in scenery. The trenches are cold and "glum." Instead of feeling happy and excited about life, the young man has been beaten down by his wartime experience and filled with despair. This stark contrast—between the gentle peace of life back home and the dismal, loud, soul-crushing reality of war—is presented swiftly and straightforwardly. The speaker doesn't have to explain to the reader how horrific war is; the juxtaposition against the young soldier's prior life does all the work.

There is additionally a clear juxtaposition between the reality of war, as exemplified by the poem's second stanza, and the public's perception of the fighting from a safe distance. Far from the conflict, the crowds are "smug-faced," or self-satisfied, and joyously cheer for the young soldiers walking through the streets. The crowd's exuberance contrasts with the soldier boy's "cowed and glum" reality. This juxtaposition implicitly critiques the public for its unthinking perpetuation of war as some glorious and heroic endeavor.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 2-6
- Lines 9-10

VOCABULARY

Soundly (Line 3) - Without being interrupted; comfortably.

Lark (Line 4) - A small brown bird with a pretty song.

Trenches (Line 5) - Long ditches dug by soldiers throughout western Europe during WWI. Soldiers would fire at the other side from the trenches, which soon became horrible environments full of damp and disease.

Cowed (Line 5) - Intimidated and scared.

Glum (Line 5) - Miserable.

Crumps (Line 6) - The loud thudding sounds of explosive shells.

Lice (Line 6) - Small biting insects that were an infuriating presence in the "winter trenches."

Smug-faced (Line 9) - With faces expressing self-satisfaction.

Kindling (Line 9) - Small bits of wood used to start a fire.

Lads (Line 10) - Young men/boys.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Suicide in the Trenches" has a very simple form that supports its powerful moral message. The poem consists of three quatrains, each written in iambic tetrameter and using the same simple AABB rhyme scheme. The simplicity of the form makes the soldier's suicide the stark and uncompromising center of the poem. The suicide is a tragic event—though just one among countless others—and the poem asks the reader to confront it without any elaborate formal decoration. Indeed, it is literally at the center of the poem, falling in the middle of the second stanza.

Each stanza serves a distinct purpose in the way that the poem unfolds. The first stanza paints a picture of idyllic pre-war life. The second stanza, as discussed above, talks about life in the trenches and the suicide itself. The third stanza functions as a warning to those members of the public back home who uncritically support the war. The structure here seems to isolate the act of suicide, giving the reader a greater sense of the young soldier's despair.

METER

As with Sassoon's other famous war poems, "Suicide in the Trenches" has a regular meter. In this case, it's iambic tetrameter—meaning there are four metrical feet in each line, each with an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (da-DUM). The poem's meter is very consistent, featuring little variation. Here are the first two lines as an example:

I knew | a simp- | le sol- | dier boy
Who grinned | at life | in emp- | ty joy,

This metrical regularity has two important effects. First, it evokes the sound of marching, which ties in with the war setting. There's something relentless about the march of syllables as the poem unfolds, perhaps hinting at the soldier's mental exhaustion and exasperation. The meter also gives the poem a simplicity that seems appropriate for the subject. There is no messiness or poetic complication to distract from the clear, horrifying story being told.

That said, there is one obvious metrical variation in line 8:

No | one spoke | of him | again.

Here the line cuts away the first unstressed syllable (a technique known as *catalexis*). Briefly changing the meter here makes the line more stark, intensifying the heartbreaking way in which the man—who is more of a boy, really—is so quickly forgotten.

RHYME SCHEME

"Suicide in the Trenches" has a consistent rhyme scheme throughout its 12 lines. The poem is written in pairs of rhyming couplets, each stanza following an AABB scheme that thus plays out over the course of the poem as:

AABB CCDD EEFF

The main effect of this rhyme scheme is a sense of ease and simplicity. First, the simple tone suits the character being described—"a simple soldier boy." The child-like rhymes in the first stanza—boy/joy (which emphasizes youthful happiness) and dark/lark—could almost appear in a nursery rhyme. The simple rhyme scheme also makes the suicide itself dramatic and powerful without the need for much discussion or detail. It speaks for itself, placed at the center of the poem's simple set of rhymes.

SPEAKER

The poem uses a first-person perspective, but the reader learns very little about this "I." Indeed, the first-person pronoun only appears once.

What's clear is that this person has a close familiarity with the reality of war. To that end, most readers interpret this "I" as the direct voice of Siegfried Sassoon himself. His poems were powerful and popular in large part because people trusted that they were based on genuine and authentic wartime experience—unlike the jingoistic poetry of writers like Jessie Pope and Rupert Brooke (who, it must be said, were very popular at one time too!).

The speaker of this poem sounds like a person who has been crushed by the experience of war, but, unlike the suicidal "soldier boy," this individual survived to tell the tale (the poem is in the past tense). Having seen the reality of war—as opposed to the fictional *image* of war sold to people back home—the speaker sees certain attitudes in the public as dangerous and wrong. The naive encouragement of young "soldier lads," argues the speaker, in part contributes to the war itself. That is, unthinking patriotism is part of the fuel that fires "the hell where youth and laughter go."

SETTING

"Suicide in the Trenches" takes place during World War I. The poem is written in the past-tense, which in this instance provides a sense that the poem is based on lived experience rather than an imagined view of war. Indeed, part of the mission of Sassoon's poetry was to give the public back home a more accurate picture—tragic events and all—of the First World War.

The poem's three stanzas divide neatly into three more specific settings. The first stanza focuses on the "simple soldier boy"—the "suicide" of the title. It takes the reader to the soldier's pre-war life back home, which is so far removed from life in the trenches it might as well be on Mars. Of course, it was most likely in England, which is also suggested by the presence of the "lark" bird. This stanza creates a false sense of peace and calm, which has, of course, already been undermined by the title.

The second stanza places the reader right inside the First World War conflict. It focuses on the misery of the winter trenches (most likely on the Western Front, the collective name for the warfare taking place in Western Europe) and portrays the "soldier boy" as a desperate, isolated figure. Here, the suicide itself takes place—with no sense of ceremony and without any further discussion.

The third stanza returns to the U.K., where "smug-faced crowds" line the streets and cheer new soldiers on their way to war. It's a stark contrast with the tragedy of the second stanza, and shows the divide between two distinct settings—the home country and the war front.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Siegfried Sassoon was and remains one of the best-known poets of the First World War. His poetry has endured in large part because of its authenticity, with Sassoon drawing on his own remarkable experiences during the war (including, for example, getting shot in the head). This poem was first published in a magazine, before appearing in Sassoon's 1918 collection *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*.

"Suicide in the Trenches" ranks among Sassoon's most widely-known poems, along with others like "Attack" and "Dreamers." Sassoon uses unflinching details and spares no punches in his work. In this poem, he bluntly approaches the subject of suicide, which was very taboo at the time. There was little sympathy or help available for distressed soldiers, which is why this "soldier boy" is forgotten almost as quick as he takes his own life.

In terms of like-minded poets, Sassoon has most in common with his friend Wilfred Owen. Both poets wanted to show the public the reality of war—the tragedy and horror of war—as an antidote to the poisonous and false romantic visions of war constructed by poets like Jessie Pope and Rupert Brooke. In fact, both of these latter poets make for worthy comparison—it's easy to tell which poems are based on first-hand experience of this terrible conflict.

Sassoon's poems is certainly not the only one that features a lark, an important bird in the British literary imagination (inasmuch as that can be said to exist). The poem appears in works by Geoffrey Chaucer and William Shakespeare, and in "The Lark Ascending," a poem which Sassoon himself called "perfection" (and on which Ralph Vaughan Williams's musical composition of the same name was based).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The First World War, which ran from 1914 to 1918, was a conflict unlike any other in human history up until that point. Initially sparked by the assassination of the Archduke Franz

Ferdinand, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, the conflict pulled in most of the world like falling dominoes. France, Russia, and England were pitted in alliance against Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy, although many other countries became involved too, with the American engagement helping to bring about the war's end.

It was a conflict like no other because it was, in a way, a terrible and perfect storm in which the deadly ambitions of generals on either side were paired with significant advances in military technology. This lethal combination meant the number of casualties were unparalleled, and the Western Front—the main area of fighting in Western Europe—has sometimes been likened to a meat-grinder in the way that young life was destroyed effortlessly and relentlessly. As Sassoon's poem makes clear, the First World War took a deadly toll on the youth of Europe, and many of the soldiers were barely adults at all.

Whereas earlier battles in human history were, though bloody, frequently short conflicts, the First World War dragged on and on, with both sides literally bedding into trenches dug along the Western Front. Here, soldiers endured terribly damp conditions, kept awake by the sound of exploding shells, bitten by "lice," and surrounded by their deceased and dismembered comrades. Sassoon served extensively in the conflict, earning a reputation for bravery and becoming a voice of dissent against the war itself (or the way it was being fought and presented).

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to a reading of the poem by Stephen Graham. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aLuTiITZykg)
- Bringing WWI to Life — In this clip, director Peter Jackson discusses his recent WWI film, They Shall Not Grow Old. Though technology, Jackson brings old war footage to vivid life. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZY7RQAX_03c)
- More Poems From WWI — A valuable resource from the Poetry Foundation focusing on First World War poetry. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/70139/the-poetry-of-world-war-i)
- Sassoon's Life and Work — A BBC Radio documentary about Siegfried Sassoon and his poetry. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ge2Y0oN-ee8)
- The Lark Ascending — A performance of Ralph Vaughan Williams's brilliant composition, inspired by George Meredith's poem of the same name (of which Sassoon was a great admirer). (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOWN5fQnzGk)
- Sassoon's Correspondence — A letter from Sassoon to his uncle, shortly after Sassoon was wounded in battle. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/siegfried-sassoon-letters-to-his-uncle)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER SIEGFRIED SASSOON POEMS

- Attack

HOW TO CITE

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