The Soldier

POEM TEXT

1 If I should die, think only this of me:
2 That there's some corner of a foreign field
3 That is for ever England. There shall be
4 In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
5 A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
6 Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam;
7 A body of England's, breathing English air,
8 Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

9 And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
10 A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
11 Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;
12 Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
13 And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
14 In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

SUMMARY

If I die in the war, I want to be remembered in a particular way. Think of how the far-off land on which I die will have a small piece of England forever. That earth will be enriched by my dead body, because my body is made from dirt born in England. England created me and gave me consciousness, gave me her blooming plants to fall in love with, and gave me my sense of freedom. My body belongs to England, has always breathed English air. England's rivers cleansed me, and I was blessed by England's sun.

Also consider the way in which my soul, through death, will be made pure. My consciousness will return to the immortal consciousness like a beating pulse, and return the beautiful thoughts that England gave me. I'll return the sights and sounds of my home country; to the beautiful dreams that were as happy as England's daytime; and to the laughter shared with English friends. And I'll return England's gentleness, which lives in the English minds that are at peace under the English sky (the English heaven where I will be at peace too when I die).

THEMES

WAR, PATRIOTISM, AND NATIONHOOD

"The Soldier" explores the bond between a patriotic British soldier and his homeland. Through this soldier's passionate discussion of his relationship to England, the poem implies that people are formed by their home environment and culture, and that their country is something worth defending with their life. Indeed, the soldier sees himself as *owing* his own identity and happiness to England—and accordingly is willing to sacrifice his life for the greater good of his nation. This is, then, a deeply patriotic poem, implicitly arguing that nations have their own specific character and values—and that England's are especially worthy of praise.

Though most people might fear death—particularly of the violent kind that war can bring—the speaker of "The Soldier" is prepared to die because he believes hew would be doing it for his beloved homeland. The speaker thus doesn't want people to grieve his death. He sees that potential death—in some "foreign field" (notably "foreign" because it won't be in England)—as a way of making a small piece of the world "for ever England." That's because he sees himself as an embodiment of his nation. Accordingly, dying somewhere "foreign" leaves a small part of the home nation in that foreign land. Nationhood, then, is portrayed as something that is inseparable from a person's identity—even when they die.

Indeed, the speaker feels he owes his identity itself primarily to his country. It was the personified England that "bore" and "shaped" him, nourished him with sun (ironic, given the often gloomy weather!) and air, and cleansed him with "water." Much of the sonnet's octave—the eight-line stanza—is devoted to creating a sense of England as a pastoral, idyllic, and even Eden-like place. The poem's imagery of rivers, flowers, earth, air, and sun, is part of an attempt to transform nationhood from a human concept to something more fundamental and natural (all the while tied to England specifically), as though the land is infused with the character of its people and vice versa.

In fact, this nationhood is *so* deeply embedded in who people are—or so the poem argues—that it extends beyond the earthly realm. Even the heaven that the speaker hopes to go to is specifically an "English heaven." In part, that's because the speaker's idea of heaven is a projection of how he sees England—apart from being a kind of natural and nurturing mother, England is *already* a kind of heaven. Indeed, the poem presents England and heaven as almost interchangeable—as described above, everything about England is supposedly pure and nourishing. The speaker's consciousness, after he dies, will

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return to an "eternal mind" which will *still* be forever linked to the place that created it.

There is nothing in the poem, then, of the horrors of war. Indeed, there is very little of the realities of war at all. This perhaps explains why the poem has inspired strong reactions ever since its publication. It was immensely popular when it was published in 1914, but this was before the true horrors of the First World War had been fully revealed, a time when the war was still tinged with an air of excitement, anticipation, and, of course, patriotism. In the decades that followed, some critics saw Brooke's poetry as woefully naïve and sentimental. Either way, the poem is a powerful expression of patriotic desire and belief in the bond between people and their homeland.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;

The poem's title sets up the idea that, rather than being one particular individual, this speaker stands for a particular type of person more broadly—the patriotic soldier. The speaker is an archetype, a kind of idealized version of how a soldier ought to be.

The first line of the poem lays down its opening gambit, implying that people need not grieve the speaker's death for reasons that are about to follow. This is typical of the poem's form: sonnets are often like arguments in miniature, in the sense that they often open with an assertion that the rest of the poem must go on to prove. This poem's point to prove is that people should not be sad about the speaker's death—and line 2 begins the reasoning behind this assertion.

This poem is deeply patriotic about England—and it's this patriotism that is behind the speaker's logic. He asserts that, when he dies in a far off "foreign field," his fallen body will in turn make wherever he dies a part of England too. In other words, his bodily remains will continue to exude Englishness. The way that line 2 enjambs into line 3 makes this phrase stretch into the next line, the last word placed far-away from the first in order to imitate the soldier's own travels to foreign lands. The caesura after "England" in line 3 works with this, creating a powerful pause that impresses upon the reader the significance of the soldier's home nation.

After that caesura, the poem uses its first metaphor—though it is one grounded in reality too. Imagining the location of his future death, the speaker compares his own body to the earth's soil. Because the speaker is essentially a part of England, his death will enrich the land on which he dies because it will infuse it with that same Englishness. This is characterized as a kind of richness, the diacope (also polyptoton) in line 4 between "rich" and "richer" highlighting England—and Englishness—as a kind of rare and precious material.

LINES 5-8

A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam;
A body of England's, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

Whereas the first quatrain of the poem's octave (sometimes called an octet, or eight-line stanza) sets up the poem's main premise, the second half deals more specifically with England—attempting to justify the speaker's claim that his dead body will enrich the surrounding land because, as a product of England, he will impart some of this Englishness into the surrounding soil.

This whole section is full of caesura and asyndeton (a device that leaves out conjunctions like "and"). This gives the quatrain a breathless quality, as though there are so many reasons to list about why England is great that the speaker barely has time to do so. The tone is very much impassioned too.

Essentially, the speaking soldier here characterizes England through personification. England is portrayed as a kind of mother figure (note the female pronouns in line 6), who is almost godlike, comparable to Mother Nature. The speaker was born of England—that is, England metaphorically gave birth to him. It then nurtured him ("shaped"), and made him conscious ("made aware"). In other words, the speaker owes *everything* to England.

The diacope between the two "her[s]" in line 6 further emphasizes England's womanliness. The First World War was fought predominantly by young men. So, in treating England as a woman, the poem implicitly compares this country-soldier relationship not only to a mother-son relationship, but also to a romantic relationship between a man and a woman. In other words, the speaker feels a powerful connection to England in both body and soul.

Line 6 also associates England with the ideals of past English poets like John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley, who emphasized the importance of nature and nurturing one's soul. The mention of flowers relates to natural beauty and the "ways to roam" suggests a kind of innate freedom. That is, England literally provides the landscape for youthful romps and frolicking. Metaphorically, it nurtures an appreciation of freedom, love, and the natural world.

Line 7 restates that the speaker's body belongs to England, and

always will. Because he has "breath[ed] English air" all his life, the speaker is inherently English. Indeed, in line 8, England has cleansed him and "blest" (blessed) him. There are religious connotations at work here, England granting the soldier a kind of purity of the soul—and this idea is to return in the poem's closing words ("English heaven").

This is, of course, an intensely idealized portrayal of an individual's relationship with their home country. Many readers will rightly note that there is little of the realities of war on show in this poem—understandably so, as Rupert Brooke didn't know them first-hand. Instead, the poem is more like the propaganda used to attract young men to sign up for the war, painting a picture of heroism and eternal reward.

LINES 9-11

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;

Line 9 marks the arrival of the poem's sestet. Traditionally, in a sonnet this marks the poem's volta, or turn, when the speaker changes the direction of the poem's argument. Here, this is the point at which the speaker focuses his attention on the afterlife. Whereas the first stanza concentrated more on the speaker's body and his experiences of the physical world, this stanza discusses the fate of the speaker's soul. Through his patriotic death, the speaker imagines he will be transformed into a kind of pure Englishness. Indeed, even after death something of the reciprocal relationship between himself and England will remain—it will think of him, and he of it.

There's definitely a religious sentiment at play in this section, inspired by the tradition of Christianity in England. According to the poem, in death "all evil" will be "shed away" (such as the evils of war), and the speaker will be restored to the "eternal mind" as nothing but a mere "pulse." Similarly, Christianity emphasizes the ability for human souls to be washed clean of sin and return to God after death. Here, the speaker's special twist on this belief is to equate *God* with *England*.

The /l/ consonance in these lines likewise seems to pulse through them gently, mirroring the idea that the speaker will return to some greater consciousness (and *still* be wedded to England):

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;

England continues to be personified. It offers "thoughts" to the speaker, and when he dies he gives those "thoughts" back. The speaker becomes one with England.

The use of "somewhere" here is intentionally vague because it relates to a spiritual realm, which the speaker will later call an "English heaven." This use of "somewhere" also plays on the idea of "foreign" lands mentioned in line 2, the sort which the speaker will have to travel to during the war.

LINES 12-14

Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

The second half of the poem's sestet intensifies the sentiments of the first. Essentially, it offers up the soldier's belief in the way that his consciousness will somehow be returned—through his patriotic death—to a greater and purer Englishness. Englishness and heaven are almost one and the same concept here. A good analogy for what's going on might be as follows: the speaker's bodily existence is like a cup of water taken from a sea of Englishness, and, in death, that water will be returned to the sea.

Lines 12 to 13 list reasons why the speaker feels such passion and affection for his home nation. England is presented as a kind of Eden, a place without hardship or pain. Like in lines 5-8, the poem here uses frequent caesura, as well as alliteration and consonance, to give the phrases a breathless and impassioned sound:

Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

The alliteration of /d/, /h/, and /l/ sounds has a kind of sweetness to it. Additionally, soft /n/ consonance is used to portray "gentleness." Modern readers might find all these gentle sounds overindulgent, but to contemporary readers it would have captured the beautiful sentiments the speaker is expressing.

For the speaker, England already is a kind of heaven—conversely, then, he believes that any heavenly afterlife will be England too. It's an intensely idealized and patriotic vision, one which was popular at the time but has been much criticized since.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"The Soldier" is full of alliteration. Overall, this is a very pretty-sounding and lyrical poem. The speaker presents a vision of war and death that is completely relieved by the bond he feels with his home country. The sound of the poem is suitably pleasant. That is, the sounds ring together in a way that is pleasing on the ear, avoiding any harshness that might suggest anything negative. The alliteration is an important part of this overall approach.

Appropriately enough, alliteration is first used from the very beginning. Across lines 1 to 3, the poem uses /th/ and /f/ sounds:

> If I should die, think only this of me:
> That there's some corner of a foreign field
> That is for ever England.

These sounds don't really convey anything in particular other than contributing to the overall pleasantness described in the paragraph above. Additionally, although it's not *strictly* alliterative, the repeating letter "e" in the phrase "for ever England" chimes with this sentence's musicality. Additionally, the two /f/ sounds create a pair that contrasts with "ever England," setting up the opposition between the foreign land and the home nation.

Next, in line 4, "rich" alliterates with "richer" (this repetition is also an example of diacope and polyptoton). The line itself becomes rich in the /r/ sound, thus adding to the poem's abundance of musicality.

Lines 7 to 8 are full of /b/ alliteration. These lines paint a pastoral and idyllic picture of England which ultimately makes the country sound like Eden. The repeated sounds have a pretty and luxurious effect:

> A body of England's, breathing English air,
> Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

Line 12 uses /h/ and /s/ alliteration:

> Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day

The /h/ sounds give the line an impassioned, breathless quality, while the /s/ contributes to the overall prettiness of the poem. The /l/ alliteration of the following line—"laughter, learnt of friends"—works in a similar way.

So, throughout the poem, alliteration adds to the lyrical richness of the poem, which captures the speaker's intense, patriotic love for England.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "th," "th"
- **Line 2:** "Th," "th," "f," "f"
- **Line 3:** "Th," "f," "Th"
- **Line 4:** "th," "r," "r"
- **Line 7:** "b," "E," "b," "E"
- **Line 8:** "b," "b," "b"
- **Line 9:** "th," "th," "a"
- **Line 10:** "A"
- **Line 12:** "H," "s," "s," "d," "h," "h," "d"
- **Line 13:** "l," "l"
- **Line 14:** "h," "h"

ANAPHORA

Anaphora is used just once in "The Soldier," with the word "A" in lines 5 and 7. More specifically, this might be thought of as an instance of parallelism, in which the structure of lines 5 and 6 is repeated in lines 7 and 8:

> A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
> Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam;
> A body of England's, breathing English air,
> Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

This anaphora is also part of the poem's passionate rhetorical sound. It additionally helps make the list of desirable traits about England—its natural beauty, its peacefulness, its motherliness—seem like just a few out of a list that could be even longer.

Note that the repetition of "That" in lines 2 and 3 doesn't really feel like anaphora because of the enjambment between the lines; there's no pause between the parts of the sentence. Nevertheless, its repetition does add to the poem's sense of being an impassioned speech right from the beginning.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "A"
- **Line 7:** "A"

CAESURA

Caesura is used frequently in "The Soldier." In fact, only lines 2, 4, and 11 *don't* have any caesurae in them! Different caesurae serve different functions. The first one—in line 1—helps set up the poem's main aim: the speaker wants to be remembered in a particular way, and he will explain and justify that way throughout the rest of the poem.

In line 3, the full-stop caesura creates a powerful and dramatic pause after the word "England"—thus ending the poem's first sentence. This makes "England" ring out loud and clear, emphasizing its integral importance to the poem.

The multiple caesurae in lines 5 to 8—combined with asyndeton through the lack of conjunction words like "and"—give this section an impassioned and almost breathless sound, the speaker building towards his rhetorical height. They also have a delicate sound, which subtly conveys the way that England is—in the speaker's mind at least—almost like a loving mother.

The other caesurae in the poem work similarly to those in lines 5 to 8, and are an important part of the poem's passionate argument. It's also worth noting that the placement of the

caesura in line 14 makes it similar to its opening line. This is the opening line:

> If I should die, think only this of me

And this is the closing line:

> In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

In this way, the caesura gives the poem's ending a neatness, as though showcasing the fact that the speaker has proved his point.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “,”
- **Line 3:** “.”
- **Line 5:** “,” “,”
- **Line 6:** “,” “,” “,”
- **Line 7:** “,”
- **Line 8:** “,”
- **Line 9:** “,” “,”
- **Line 10:** “,”
- **Line 12:** “;”
- **Line 13:** “,” “;”
- **Line 14:** “,”

CONSONANCE

"The Soldier" is a very lyrical and even pretty-sounding poem. This is mostly achieved through a delicate balance of rhythm and consonance. That said, a lot of the consonance in the poem is also alliteration because it comes at the beginning of the words, and accordingly those examples are covered in the specific alliteration entry for this guide.

One particularly effective way that the poem specifically uses consonance is in taking two of the main sounds of the word "England" itself—and England is at the heart of this poem. Accordingly, the poem uses a lot of /n/ and /l/ consonance throughout. These two sounds intensify as the poem builds to its conclusion. The /l/ sound is highly present in lines 9-11 (the first three lines of the poem's sestet):

> And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
> A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
> Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;

The /n/ sound—which has a gentle quality—increases in the poem's concluding two lines. This is important, because the speaker is trying to tie England together conceptually with "gentleness" and "heaven," and the consonance helps with this idea:

> And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness
> In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

As these examples show, consonance adds to the poem's rich musicality and solidifies the importance of England to the speaker.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “th,” “th”
- **Line 2:** “Th,” “th,” “r,” “r,” “r,” “f,” “r,” “f”
- **Line 3:** “Th,” “f,” “r,” “r,” “Th”
- **Line 4:** “th,” “r,” “r,” “th,” “r,” “r,” “d,” “s,” “c,” “d”
- **Line 5:** “d,” “s”
- **Line 6:** “h,” “r,” “r,” “h,” “r,” “r”
- **Line 7:** “b,” “n,” “g,” “l,” “b,” “n,” “gl”
- **Line 8:** “b,” “b,” “s,” “b,” “s”
- **Line 9:** “th,” “th,” “ll,” “l”
- **Line 10:** “l,” “s,” “n,” “n,” “l,” “n,” “n,” “l,” “ss”
- **Line 11:** “G,” “s,” “b,” “s,” “b,” “g,” “l,” “n,” “g,” “n”
- **Line 12:** “s,” “s,” “nd,” “s,” “d,” “s,” “d,” “s,” “h,” “s,” “h,” “d”
- **Line 13:** “d,” “l,” “gh,” “l,” “n,” “f,” “n,” “n,” “n,” “l,” “n,” “ss”
- **Line 14:** “n,” “s,” “c,” “n,” “n,” “n”

ENJAMBMENT

"The Soldier" is fairly sparing in its use of enjambment. The first example is between the end of line 2 and the start of line 3. Here, the poem is laying England side-by-side with "foreign field"—the home nation versus the strange far-off site of war. The enjambment contributes to this, stretching the phrase's length beyond the end of line 2, the delay of its completion conveying the way that the soldier's fighting will take place away from home. When the phrase eventually does complete, it's firmly on the word "England." The enjambment, then, helps delay the sentence's conclusion in order to make England a more dramatic and powerful word (in keeping with the soldier's love of his country).

The following enjambment from line 3 to 4 creates another feeling of suspension. Just as the soldier's English body shall be "concealed" in the soil of a foreign land, so too does this line break conceal what "There shall be." It's as if the enjambment mimics the burial of the soldier, line 4 buried under line 3.

The other example of enjambment is between lines 10 and 11. Here, the speaker is talking about a kind of reciprocal relationship between himself and England after he is dead. England is portrayed as a kind of "eternal mind" and spiritual afterlife, a sentiment that is mixed together with the soldier's seemingly Christian beliefs. The use of enjambment creates a longer phrase length that conveys the idea that the soldier's mind will somehow continue to "pulse," returning thoughts to England.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "field"
- **Line 3:** "That," "be"
- **Line 4:** " In"
- **Line 10:** "less"
- **Line 11:** " Gives"

METAPHOR

"The Soldier" is a highly figurative poem with a grand-sounding rhetorical tone. Accordingly, metaphor flows throughout the poem from start to finish. That said, most of the poem uses a specific type of metaphor known as personification: the speaker's beloved England is presented as a kind of nurturing mother (and Mother Nature) figure. This aspect of the poem is discussed in the personification entry of this guide.

There is another metaphor at work in lines 3 and 4. The speaker imagines his dead body—slain in battle—enriching the surrounding earth with a "richer dust." This metaphor compares Englishness to a precious material that the speaker imagines will be absorbed by the "foreign field," ultimately making the field somehow more spiritually valuable too.

In lines 10-11, the speaker also has a metaphorical conception of what will happen to his consciousness after he dies. He believes that he will exist only as a "pulse in the eternal mind," returning all his thoughts of England to the "English heaven" that they came from. In other words, the speaker compares heaven to an "eternal mind" and his own soul to a "pulse" in that mind. This can also be interpreted as the speaker's *actual* belief. That is, the speaker may really believe that the world is watched over by an immortal consciousness, such as God, that the speaker shall return to when he dies. Either way, this moment adds to the lyrical richness of the speaker's patriotic interpretation of his own death.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "There shall be / In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;"
- **Lines 10-11:** " A pulse in the eternal mind, no less / Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;"

PERSONIFICATION

Personification is an important part of "The Soldier." It establishes the relationship between the speaker and England that is at the center of the poem.

Personification is part of the way that the poem presents its key subject: England. The speaker always refers to England through female pronouns, which contrasts with the fact that the First World War was fought predominantly by young men. Furthermore, the speaker presents his home nation as a kind of mother figure. In lines 5 and 6, the speaker relays how England "bore" (gave birth) to him, "shaped" him, and made him conscious. So England is not only a nurturing mother figure—there's also something godlike about "her."

In fact, England's behavior is not far removed from God's at the beginning of the Bible: like God, England creates a paradise in which people are granted the freedom to live as they like. That is, England creates a kind of Eden for its inhabitants. The speaker essentially says that he owes his entire existence to England, which is why he seems at peace with sacrificing that same existence for his country.

In the second stanza, England is also characterized as a conscious being. Again, this draws on godlike attributes—England's an "eternal mind" without "evil." Here, though, the personification of England focuses on its abstract characteristics, its "thoughts" and "dreams." This stanza depicts England not just as a physical place, but also as a spiritual state of being. Just as people have both bodies and minds, so does England have both a landscape and an "eternal mind."

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-8
- Lines 9-12

ASYNDETON

Asyndeton is used throughout lines 5 to 8 and in line 12. In lines 5 and 6, the asyndeton gives the speaker's tone a breathless, impassioned quality, as though he is suddenly overcome with emotion:

> A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
> Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam;

It also allows the lines to pack a number of verbs into a short space—"bore," "shaped," "made aware," and "Gave." This works with the personification of England to make the country seem like an active, caring, and nurturing mother. The images of nature, like "flowers," further treat England as a godlike, Mother Nature figure.

The asyndeton in lines 7 and 8 discusses the speaker's idyllic experiences of England, to which his body belongs. The air is English, and he has been washed and blest by England's rivers and suns. The asyndeton again has the same effect of giving the lines an impassioned sound. It also helps make England's apparent caring and loving seem as though they are without end. This is a kind of list that could feasibly continue on indefinitely, with no "and" signaling the final item in the list.

The asyndeton achieves a similar effect in line 12, though here the speaker is discussing his relationship with England in more abstract and less pastoral terms. Furthermore, the speaker *does* go on to use the conjunction "and" in lines 13 and 14. This use

of "and" captures the fact that the speaker is imagining the end of his life. Though the speaker *could* go on forever listing all the good things about England, there's finally one phrase that sums it all up: "English heaven."

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-8:** "A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware, / Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam; / A body of England's, breathing English air, / Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home."
- **Line 12:** "Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;"

DIACOPE

Diacope is used frequently in "The Soldier."

The first example is in the near-repetition of "rich" and "richer" in line 4. This subtle shift (an example of polyptoton, in which a word is repeated in different forms) represents the way that the speaker feels about his own dead body: that it is a part of England itself and will enrich the earth in which it lays. The repetition of the word "rich" makes the line itself seem "richer," as though it is being distilled into similar sounds and concepts.

In another example of diacope, line 4's "dust" is repeated at the start of line 5:

> In that rich earth a richer **dust** concealed;
> A **dust** whom England bore, shaped, made aware

This is part of the way that the poem develops its argument. The mention of "dust"—a metaphor for the speaker's own decaying body—opens up his discussion of the *source* of that dust: his beloved England. As with many of the poem's other devices, this instance adds to the poem's sense of passion and rhetorical beauty.

The speaker also repeats the words "England" and "English" throughout the poem. This, of course, underlines the strength of the bond that the speaker feels between himself and his home nation. England, to him, is the source of his own existence and the place to which that existence will return in death—England is the force that has shaped everything about him.

The poem also repeats the word "her" numerous times, which is part of the personification of "England." This helps build the case that England is a kind of nurturing mother and godlike figure, and emphasizes the fact that England is presented as female rather than male. Relatedly, the "gives" and "given" repeat of line 11 characterize the speaker's relationship with England as reciprocal and spiritually nourishing.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "England"
- **Line 4:** "rich," "richer," "dust"
- **Line 5:** "dust," "England"
- **Line 6:** "her," "to," "her," "to"
- **Line 7:** "England's," "English"
- **Line 8:** "by," "by"
- **Line 11:** "Gives," "given"
- **Line 12:** "Her," "her"
- **Line 13:** "And," "and"

VOCABULARY

Bore (Line 5) - This means "gave birth to," and forms part of the poem's depiction of England as a motherly and godlike figure.

Made Aware (Line 5) - This means something along the lines of "gave consciousness to." The speaker is crediting his understanding of the world to England.

Roam (Line 6) - To *roam* is to travel freely and widely.

Blest (Line 8) - This is an old spelling of "blessed."

Shed (Line 9) - To *shed* something is to discard it or lose it, in the way that trees "shed" their leaves. The speaker is imagining a kind of purity that will come with his patriotic death, when he leaves all the evils of the world behind.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Soldier" borrows from both the Shakespearean and the Petrarchan versions of the sonnet. The first stanza follows the rhyme scheme of a Shakespearean sonnet, while the second follows that of a Petrarchan sonnet. Structurally, however, the poem more closely adheres to the Petrarchan sonnet overall, which is divided into an octave (an eight-line stanza) and a sestet (a six-line stanza).

The poem makes the argument that, when the speaker dies, he should be remembered in a particular way: without sadness and with a deep sense of patriotism. The poem introduces this concept in the first three and a half lines, and then sets about providing evidence to justify it. It provides a rich series of examples to illustrate why death for England is glorious rather than sad.

One of the signature elements of a sonnet is a turn, or *volta*. This is when the poem shifts the direction of its argument, and in Petrarchan sonnets it usually happens at the start of the sestet. The volta in this poem is subtle. After all, the speaker's passion for England rises continuously throughout the poem. But there is a difference between the two stanzas: the first is based in physical reality, while the second is about the

speaker's soul and the afterlife. However, the poem ends pretty much as it has been throughout—with an appeal to the heavenliness of England.

METER

"The Soldier" is written in formal, metrical verse. As is typical of sonnets in the English language, Brooke employs iambic pentameter—lines of five feet with an unstressed-stressed, da DUM, syllable pattern—throughout the poem. The first line offers up a typical example of this pattern:

> If **I** | should **die,** | think **on-** | ly **this** | of **me:**

The steady sound of the iambs matches the formal, high-flown rhetoric that the speaker uses throughout. That said, there are a couple of notable variations. Line 4 *can* be read as iambic pentameter too, but could *also* be read like this:

> In that | **rich earth** | a **rich-** | er **dust** | con**cealed;**

The two adjacent stresses of "**rich earth**" (a type of foot called a spondee) sound like a kind of purification or increase in strength—which is what the speaker claims his body will cause in the soil wherever he dies.

Line 5 is metrically interesting too. Again, it depends on how it is read—it can be scanned as iambic pentameter or can interpreted as more stress-heavy:

> A **dust** | whom **Eng-** | land **bore,** | **shaped, made** |
> a**ware,**

This creates a heavy emphasis on the phrase's verbs, in turn portraying England as an active and nurturing influence on the soldier.

Finally, it's worth noting that the poem *doesn't* end on a stressed syllable, which is what would normally happen in a line of iambic pentameter. Instead, it ends with a gentle unstressed syllable, which emphasizes the "gentleness" of England and the sense in which the speaker believes his sacrificial death will grant him "peace":

> In **hearts** | at **peace,** | **un**der | an **Eng-** | lish **heav**en.

This is an example of a feminine ending, and it's also discussed in the rhyme section of this guide.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Soldier" has a regular rhyme scheme that borrows from two different sonnet traditions, using a Shakespearean rhyme scheme in the octave (the first eight lines) and a Petrarchan rhyme scheme in the sestet (the final six).

The octave is rhymed:

> ABABCDCD

This is a Shakespearean rhyme scheme (Shakespeare rhymes all his sonnets in this manner). The rhymes all sound loud and clear, and this neatness is part of the poem's generally formal and stately-sounding rhetoric. The poem is an idealized poem—it doesn't discuss the grim realities of warfare—and accordingly the rhymes represent a kind of idyllic perfection too.

The sestet is rhymed:

> ABCABC

(Note that this stanza uses different rhymes from the first stanza). This is the rhyme scheme Petrarch uses in his sonnets. The most significant aspect here is the way that the poem ends on a particularly soft-sounding rhyme: "given" and "heaven." This is a feminine rhyme, meaning the word features a rhymed stressed syllable followed by a rhymed unstressed syllable: "**giv**en" and "**heav**en." This rhyme has a "gentleness" to it (which is also one of the end-words), representing the speaker's idea of England as a kind of heavenly paradise free from evil.

This final rhyme is also a subtle example of slant rhyme. Yet the two sounds are so similar that the rhyme comes off more as an elegant pairing than a jarring moment of dissonance. And because the rhyme between "given" and "heaven" is a fairly complex one, it suggests the deliberateness with which the speaker chooses the poem's final word.

SPEAKER

The speaker in this poem is, of course, the "soldier" of the title. The reader learns nothing specific about this soldier's circumstances, and that's because this soldier is a kind of idealized figure who represents an equally idealized way of considering nationhood and patriotism.

The speaker feels himself—in every fiber of his being—to be an Englishman. He considers himself a son of England—and England is personified as a kind of nurturing mother/Mother Nature figure throughout. The speaker thus buys into a traditionally patriotic view of England, one especially tied to the pastoral beauty of its "green and pleasant land" (an oft-quoted description of England from the hymn "Jerusalem," with words from a poem by William Blake). This relationship is mostly explored in the first stanza, with its mentions of "dust," "flowers," "air," "rivers," and "suns."

The speaker is contented with the idea of his death, even embracing it. That's because he feels that dying is a noble sacrifice, part of his way of returning the love that his country has showed him. Indeed, the speaker sees England not just as a nurturing figure, but also as a kind of heaven itself, linking his spiritual nourishment—in this life and what follows—to his homeland. Accordingly, he sees his eternity as one spent in "an

English heaven."

SETTING

The setting of this poem can fairly be described as the speaker's *idea* of England. He sees himself—in both body and mind—as an extension of England. If he is to die during the war, then a small part of England will enrich the soil wherever he dies. The rest of the first stanza discusses his beloved England, portraying it as a pastoral paradise—saying little of the rain that often falls there! Instead, England is like Eden: a kind of rich and beautiful garden full of flowers, fresh air, flowing rivers, and sunshine. This sets up the way that the second stanza explicitly links England to heaven itself ("hearts at peace, under an English heaven"). Indeed, heaven and England are practically interchangeable in the speaker's mind.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Rupert Brooke was an English poet who lived from 1887 to 1915. He wrote poetry from an early age and attended Cambridge University. He joined the English Navy during the first year of the First World War (1914). However, he died the following year—not in warfare, as the patriotic tone of the poem might lead the reader to believe, but from poisoning brought on by an insect bite. His early poetic influences include W.B. Yeats, Charles Baudelaire, John Keats, and Oscar Wilde.

Brooke's poetry was immensely popular from its first publication, capturing the nervous excitement of a nation at war. Though Brooke did serve in the Navy, he never saw active conflict in the First World War, perhaps explaining why "The Soldier" is a romantic and idealized take on war and nationhood. These traits, too, help to explain Brooke's poems' initial popularity. Indeed, Winston Churchill—prime minister during the Second World War—described Brooke as "all that one could wish England's noblest sons to be." In other words, Brooke's poetry came to exemplify the patriotic soldier, willing to lay his life on the line for the greater good of his country.

Of course, this intensely patriotic and idealized look at the relationship between a soldier, his home country, and war tells the reader little of the horrific realities of the conflict in which millions were killed. To use a biblical analogy, Brooke's poem pictures a kind of Eden, one where horror and suffering don't exist.

Accordingly, it's worth comparing the poem with examples from the rich tradition of war poetry tied to both the First and Second World Wars. Wilfried Owen's poems, for example, are far more world-weary, intensely aware of what it's actually like to be involved in armed conflict (see "Dulce et Decorum Est" especially). Siegfried Sassoon also served in the same conflict, while Keith Douglas—a poet from World War Two—makes for interesting comparison too. Looking at more contemporary poems, readers could also go to Owen Sheers's "Mametz Wood" for a recent poem that tries to deal with the specifics of war.

There is another overlapping element of the poem's literary context that is important here too. This is about how the English relate to their own country, and particularly how English writers have idealized England. This poem seems to subscribe to the idea of England as an idyllic and holy "green and pleasant land" (a quote from William Blake's "Jerusalem"). The reader could be forgiven for thinking that England is full of sunshine and fresh air (a rumor that this guide writer can verify is *not* true!). Other famous depictions of England are at play too—the poem doesn't seem a million miles from John of Gaunt's deathbed speech in Shakespeare's *Richard II*:

> This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle,
> This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
> This other Eden, demi-paradise,
> [...]
> This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England.

This quote, like Brooke's poem, depicts England as a holy place and, essentially, a force for good in the world.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

At the time, World War I was described with the term "the war to end all wars"—a phrase that of course turned out to be tragically inaccurate with the onset of World War II. Around 16 million people died directly in WWI, with many more perishing in the great flu outbreaks and genocides (for example, the Armenian Genocide) that followed.

The war began with the assassination of Archduke Franz-Ferdinand, who was the heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire (which ruled a large section of Central and Eastern Europe at the time). The assassin, Gavrilo Princip, wished to see an end to Austro-Hungarian rule in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Previously arranged allegiances soon brought Germany and Russia into opposition, and before too long this conflict pulled the other countries of Europe into the war as well. In 1915, the Germans sank a British passenger ship called the Lusitania, killing many civilians. Among other reasons, this event drew the United States into the conflict as well.

As described in the poem, WWI was a horrendously destructive war. Life in the trenches of Europe was terrifying and deadly, and the poor conditions caused frequent sickness and disease. But Brooke didn't see any of that, dying in an unrelated incident early on into the conflict. Accordingly, this preserved him as a kind of mythic figure, a reputation also enabled by his handsome looks and his patriotic sensibilities.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Learn More About War Poetry — A series of podcast documentaries from the University of Oxford about various aspects of World War I poetry. (http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/series/british-world-war-one-poetry-introduction)
- First World War Poetry — More poems and an insightful essay about WWI from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/70139/the-poetry-of-world-war-i)
- 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, restoring a sense of the soldiers as actual people. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_cSXfKSRKz4)
- A Reading of "The Soldier" — The poem read by David Barnes for Librivox. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BcDQZTJU_aA)
- So Great a Lover: The Life of Rupert Brooke — A BBC documentary exploring the short life and work of Rupert Brooke. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INLagc7KhIg)

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