Who's for the Game?

POEM TEXT

Who's for the game, the biggest that's played,
The red crashing game of a fight?
Who'll grip and tackle the job unafraid?
And who thinks he'd rather sit tight?
Who'll toe the line for the signal to 'Go!'?
Who'll give his country a hand?
Who wants a turn to himself in the show?
And who wants a seat in the stand?
Who knows it won't be a picnic – not much –
Yet eagerly shoulders a gun?
Who would much rather come back with a crutch
Than lie low and be out of the fun?
Come along, lads –
But you'll come on all right –
For there's only one course to pursue,
Your country is up to her neck in a fight,
And she's looking and calling for you.

SUMMARY

Which of you young men is up for the biggest game of your life—a bloody, violent game? Who'll fully commit to the task—and who will chicken out? Which man will eagerly anticipate the signal for action and help his country? Don't you want to be in the greatest show of all time? Or would you rather just sit and watch on the sidelines? Who out there knows that war isn't easy, but will sign up enthusiastically anyway? Who'd prefer to see some action, even if it means getting injured, rather than miss out on an adventure? Come on, boys, come on—you know that there's really only one choice here. Your country is drowning at war, and she needs you.

THEMES

WAR, BRAVERY, AND PATRIOTISM

Jessie Pope's "Who's for the Game?" was published in a U.K. newspaper during World War I. Essentially, it asks its target audience—young men—whether they are brave enough to go and defend their country through armed conflict. The poem is not subtle: it is totally pro-war and by implication argues that people should love (and be willing to die for) their country. Anything less than that, the poem argues, is a form of cowardice.

There are essentially two types of people in this world, according to the poem: those who will lay themselves on the line for their country and those who are too scared to do so. The first group are presented as brave and heroic, while the latter are cowards, and the poem presents a series of direct questions that essentially ask the reader to choose which side they are on. Young men can either join in the "biggest" "game" ever, or "sit tight" and miss out. They can be part of the "show" by helping their country, or they can be a mere spectator and take a "seat in the stand."

This juxtaposition builds a sense of war as something exciting and thrilling—which is genuinely what many people thought at the time of the poem's composition, before the true horrors became clear. And the repeated use of rhetorical question is intended to make it hard to sit on the fence as a reader (at the time at least). It's as though the poem won't leave the reader alone until they answer whether they're willing to fight for the country's cause.

And while the poem does *hint* at potential injury in war, it avoids any gruesome details. Instead, war is portrayed more as a kind of inconvenience than something tragic and terrible—it might even be "fun" and like a "game." So even if enlisting in the fight might mean returning "with a crutch"—as though it was some mere sporting injury—that's about as bad as it will get. And though war won't exactly be easy—it won't be "a picnic"—it will be "fun." Soldiers, then, won't just miss out on helping their country, but on a good time as well.

To hammer home this appeal to young men, the poem ends by personifying the country itself. Britain is presented as a kind of damsel in distress, needing a heroic "lad" to come and save her. This, too, is meant to excite and entice—and to help build the case against anyone who *isn't* patriotic or willing to fight. The poem then ends on the second-person pronoun "you," evoking a famous advert that called for young men to enlist in the army. Pope repackages that advert's slogan—"your country needs you"—and tries to create an atmosphere of anticipation and excitement in order to convince her readers that they ought to sign up.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-17

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Who's for the game, the biggest that's played,
The red crashing game of a fight?
Who'll grip and tackle the job unafraid?
And who thinks he'd rather sit tight?

Before reading through this poem, it's important to consider its context. It was published in a British newspaper early on in the First World War (1915). At that time, it was not yet compulsory for young British men to join the army—they still had a choice whether to volunteer or not. In hindsight Pope's poem, written before anyone knew the full extent of the horror and tragedy that was to spread its shadow over Europe, seems like a naive call-to-arms. It asks its target audience—young, able-bodied men and perhaps their family members too—to ask themselves if they possess the honor, integrity, and sense of duty to put their lives on the line for the good of their country.

Throughout the poem, the severity of war is played down—with conflict presented as something more like a game or a sport. This is an extended metaphor established by the title, which is also the first line of the poem. The poem uses frequent rhetorical questions—almost like an interrogation—to push its reader to decide whether they are up for the "fight" or, essentially, too much of a coward. The anaphora of "Who's/ Who'll" adds to the poem's sense of urgency and insistence.

The extended sporting metaphor is appropriate in the sense that sport matches are often played between different countries—and here, for the British, the opponent is Germany. The caesura in the first line creates emphasis on this being the "biggest" game ever played, with the prize nothing less than control over the country's future (and the defense of other nations).

Line 2 describes the war as a "red crashing game of a fight," suggesting violence without giving any real sense of the terror that is to come—indeed, this almost sounds like modern-day sports commentary! Line 3 picks up on the sporting metaphor with "grip and tackle," two verbs associated with the popular game of rugby (a bit like American Football, but with fewer pauses). The first three lines make use of /a/ assonance, drawing a connection between "a" "game" being "played" and being "unafraid," subtly reinforcing the poem's argument that to do otherwise is an act of cowardice.

Line 4 then presents the alternative to joining up—"sit[ting] tight." This kind of juxtaposition takes place throughout the poem, usually following a pattern of three lines that talk up the supposedly fun side of war followed by one that suggests the utter boredom of staying at home. The poem's clear, steady rhyme scheme further adds to its predictability. The poem can be broken down into a series of quatrains, or four-line stanzas, that follow a simple ABAB rhyme pattern (here, "played" rhymes with "unafraid" and "fight" with "tight").

It's worth noting that many people—including young men—shared Pope's excitement towards the war. In 1914 (one year before this poem's initial publication), most Brits expected the war to be done by Christmas—and some people definitely did sign up out of a sense of adventure, unaware of the death, disease, and destruction that was to come.

LINES 5-8

Who'll toe the line for the signal to 'Go!'?
Who'll give his country a hand?
Who wants a turn to himself in the show?
And who wants a seat in the stand?

Here, the rhetorical questioning of the reader continues, intensified once again through the continued use of anaphora:

Who'll toe the line for the signal to 'Go!'?
Who'll give his country a hand?
Who wants a turn to himself in the show?
And who wants a seat in the stand?

This repetition works is almost like an accusatory finger being prodded in the reader's chest, asking them: if it's not *you* who will fight the good fight, then *who* will?

"Toe the line" is an idiom that essentially means to follow the rules closely, but it also relates to sports: just think of the lines that mark the field in football, rugby, and soccer. And of course, the starting line is essential in track and field. To "toe the line" can also mean to be poised and ready at this starting line. The speaker is thus asking who will be eagerly standing at the starting line and awaiting their "signal" to fight.

Line 6 then asks who will give "his country a hand." Giving someone a hand usually means doing them a small favor, like carrying a bag up some stairs for an elderly person. Of course, young men gave a lot more than a mere helping hand to the war effort—many of them gave their lives. The use of the possessive "his" here reinforces the connection between the young men the speaker hopes to reach and the cause; this is not just any country they should be fighting for, but the one that belongs to them.

The next line, line 7, somewhat mixes the poem's main extended sporting metaphor. Now, the speaker relates the war to a kind of "show," asking who *wouldn't* want to have star "turn" in the greatest show on Earth (according to the poem's viewpoint). There is an interesting and probably accidental overlap between the notion of war as a show and the common description of the battle arena as a "theater" of war.

The poem then uses juxtaposition just as it did in the first quatrain, with line 8 framing the alternative choice to what has been presented in the three lines before. The poem asks "who wants a seat in the stand"—in other words, who would prefer to

be an irrelevant spectator during this time of national (and international) importance. The sibilance of "seat" and "stand" suggests a hissing sound, as if the speaker is sneering at anyone who might pick this option.

LINES 9-12

Who knows it won't be a picnic – not much –
Yet eagerly shoulders a gun?
Who would much rather come back with a crutch
Than lie low and be out of the fun?

These four lines allow a bit more of the reality of war into the poem, though not much. The suggestion that war "won't be a picnic" speaks to the attitude of bravery and national pride called for by the poem. That is, people signing up are, according to the poem, so courageous that they know war will have its difficulties, but they won't be *overly* worried or panicked.

Enlisting in the army is thus presented as a kind of no-brainer—only people who are scared, unpatriotic, or selfish *wouldn't* "eagerly shoulder[] a gun." The caesura in line 9 makes the "not much" sound playful, the kind of aside a friend might mutter under the breath to another friend. As with the rest of the poem thus far, this section is also comprised entirely out of rhetorical questions, with these two stretching over two line each.

Though these four lines continue the poem's regular ABAB rhyme scheme, all four words also chime together through assonance: "much," "gun," "crutch," "fun." This maintains the poem's playful, child-like tone even while what's being described is injury in war. That said, the injury described here is not especially serious—suggesting that soldiers are more likely to come back with a twisted ankle (and be on crutches) than have their heads blown apart by mortar fire. Once again, war is presented as a kind of "fun" game that people would be dumb—not just cowardly—to miss out on.

LINES 13-17

Come along, lads –
But you'll come on all right –
For there's only one course to pursue,
Your country is up to her neck in a fight,
And she's looking and calling for you.

These lines mark a subtle but significant shift in the poem. The rhetorical questions are now done, and so this section represents the speaker's final direct push to convince the reader to sign up for the war. Indeed, these lines effectively *answer* the questions that came before, suggesting that there was ever only one legitimate answer: to sign up. The speaker uses a colloquial British address for young men—"lads"—to reiterate that war is going to be fun and exciting, not much different from a good game of football or rugby.

"You'll come on all right" assumes that "lad" reading the poem will know to make the right choice (perhaps undermining the speaker's need to make the argument in the first place). Line 15 follows suit with the rest of the poem in portraying war as a kind of action—"a course to pursue"—as opposed to the cowardly inactivity of "sit[ting] tight" at home.

Here, the poem personifies the United Kingdom as a woman a kind of damsel in distress. This is not-so-subtle appeal to another kind of excitement: sexual. The poem plays into the fairy tale narrative of a young man rescuing a beautiful woman, and reinforces this by suggesting the country is already "looking" at the "lad" reading the poem.

Finally, notice how the poem ends on the second-person pronoun that makes the target of the poem crystal clear—"you," the reader. Of course, the context is key here—the poem is addressed to young "lads" weighing up whether to go to war. But there's no doubt that landing heavily on this "you"—which is a stressed syllable preceded by two unstressed ("calling for you")—is intended to have a powerful and dramatic impact. It's also worth noting that, in ending with the word "you," the poem echoes the famous 1914 poster put up all around Britain that read "Your country needs you" (underneath the pointing figure of Lord Kitchener, the country's Secretary of State for War at the time).

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"Who's for the Game" uses alliteration sparingly. It first appears in line 8:

> And who wants a seat in the stand?

The /s/ sound, or sibilance, evokes hissing and suggests the speaker sneering at those supposed cowards who'd rather sit in the sidelines than fight for their country. The alliteration of "lie low" in line 12 is also associated with cowardice. In both instances, the alliteration draws extra attention to these phrases—singling out those who won't heed the speakers call to fight.

Interestingly, the poem then uses a more subtle kind of alliteration to hammer home it's call for young men to join the army. Across the last five lines (or four if lines 13 and 14 are joined together, as they are in some printings of the poem), a forceful /k/ sound rings out loudly in "come," "course," "country," and "calling." These words are all key to the poem's overall argument—which could be paraphrased as "come on, lads, there's only one course, your country is calling for you because she needs you." These hard alliterating sounds add force to the argument, doubly effective because this section provides the emphatic answer to the earlier list of rhetorical questions.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "seat," "stand"
- **Line 11:** "come," "crutch"
- **Line 12:** "lie low"
- **Line 13:** "Come"
- **Line 14:** "come"
- **Line 15:** "course"
- **Line 16:** "country"
- **Line 17:** "calling"

ANAPHORA

"Who's for the Game" is a dogged, relentless poem that doesn't let the reader out of its sight. To build its central argument, the poem makes significant use of anaphora.

Remember, this poem was intended to help persuade young men to join the British Army (before it was made compulsory) in order to fight in the First World War. It's very much about taking responsibility, imploring again and again that people—especially young men in this case—have a duty to serve their country, and, ultimately, lay their lives on the line.

The poem builds this argument by repeatedly asking "who"—that is, if *you* won't sign up and defend your nation, *who* will? Each who is like a jabbing and accusatory finger in the reader's chest, an attempt to force the reader to answer the question and not sit on the fence. In a way, this relentless questioning becomes something more like an interrogation, with a very deliberate attempt to apply psychological pressure on readers at the time the poem was published.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Who's"
- **Line 3:** "Who'll"
- **Line 4:** "who"
- **Line 5:** "Who'll"
- **Line 6:** "Who'll"
- **Line 7:** "Who"
- **Line 8:** "who"
- **Line 9:** "Who"
- **Line 11:** "Who"

ASSONANCE

Assonance is used sparingly in "Who's for the Game?" The first example occurs in the opening three lines, with the repetition of /ay/ and /ah/ sounds:

> Who's for the game, the biggest that's played,
> The red crashing game of a fight?
> Who'll grip and tackle the job unafraid?

The vowel sounds are big and brash, subtly conveying the "crashing game" of war—making it sound exciting and lively.

In line 5, the assonance (which could also be internal rhyme in this case) between "toe" and "go" suggests preparedness and willingness to go to war. Relating to the extended sporting metaphor, "toe[ing] the line" essentially means being in the right place on the field at the right time—waiting for the action to start. Readiness and action are thus linked together conceptually through assonance.

The other key instance of assonance occurs in the end words of lines 9-12. Aside from the established ABAB rhyme scheme, these words also chime together with the same /u/ vowel sound: "much," "come," "of," "gun," "crutch," "fun." This intensifies the poem's playful, almost nursery rhyme-like tone—which is perhaps needed here given that this is the closest that the poem gets to anticipating the horror, tragedy, and sheer physical brutality of warfare. The poem here discusses injury in war as though it's just part of the "fun," the assonant sounds helping to play down the seriousness of what can happen to young men in combat.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "game," "played"
- **Line 2:** "crashing," "game"
- **Line 3:** "tackle," "unafraid"
- **Line 5:** "toe," "Go"
- **Line 6:** "give his"
- **Line 7:** "himself," "in"
- **Line 9:** "knows," "it," "won't," "picnic," "much"
- **Line 10:** "eagerly shoulders," "gun"
- **Line 11:** "much," "come," "a ," "crutch"
- **Line 12:** "fun"

CAESURA

"Who's For the Game?" makes occasional use of caesura. The first appears in the very first line:

> Who's for the game, the biggest that's played,

This packs another clause into the line, helping to convey the "big[ness]" of the "game" of war. Essentially, the caesura helps the speaker to hyperbolize—to exaggerate the game-like qualities of war (which, apart from different sides fighting one another, are few).

The next caesura occurs in line 9:

> Who knows it won't be a picnic – not much –

The dash here means that "not much" works like an aside, almost like something one friend would whisper to another. While the first example helps play up the excitement of war, this second sample plays *down* the risks of war—injury,

psychological trauma, and, of course, death. It won't be *much* of a "picnic" implies that it will be a *bit* of a picnic—an absurd idea that was soon proved false.

In some formatting of the poem, lines 13 and 14 as displayed here are treated as one line:

> Come along, lads – But you'll come on all right –

Accordingly, this would represent a third caesura—one which helps the poem intensify the pressure on its young male readership, with another aside this time directed straight at them through the use of the second person pronoun "you."

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** ","
- **Line 9:** "–"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

One main metaphor runs throughout "Who's for the Game," and it starts right from the title. The poem presents war as a kind of game, making particular reference to rugby in line 3's "grip and tackle." To best understand this metaphor, it's important to think about how metaphors function more generally.

Here, the thing being discussed is war—this part of the metaphor is known as the *tenor*. The thing it is being associated with is sports—technically known as the *vehicle*. The relationship between the two—which is what gives the metaphor its meaning—is known as the *ground*. In other words, an effective metaphor uses attributes from the vehicle to inform and color the reader's understanding of the tenor.

So, sports are meant to be fun, exciting, physical, competitive, and, in those days, played primarily by young men (the same demographic that make up the bulk of the armed forces). The ground of the metaphor thus suggests that war is all of these things too—and the development of the metaphor throughout the poem supports this idea.

Line 5's "toe the line" suggests being in the right place in sports field—or battle field—at the right time. Line 8's "seat in the stand" divides heroic participants from cowardly spectators. Line 10's mention of "shoulders" might be a specific rugby reference (a game in which shoulders are an important part!). Finally, the poem reiterates that war will be "fun," making its target audience clear: "lads" (young men).

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Who's for the game, the biggest that's played, / The red crashing game of a fight?"
- **Line 3:** "Who'll grip and tackle the job unafraid?"
- **Line 5:** "Who'll toe the line for the signal to 'Go!'?"
- **Line 8:** "And who wants a seat in the stand?"
- **Line 10:** "eagerly shoulders"
- **Line 12:** "fun"
- **Line 13:** "lads"

JUXTAPOSITION

Juxtaposition is used a key element of "Who's For the Game?" Indeed, the first 12 lines can be divided into three quatrains that follow a particular pattern that provides the reader with two distinct options—join the army and go to war, or be a coward and do nothing. As an example, here are the first four lines:

> Who's for the game, the biggest that's played,
> The red crashing game of a fight?
> Who'll grip and tackle the job unafraid?
> And who thinks he'd rather sit tight?

Notice how the first three lines here build war up with a hyped sense of excitement, tying into the poem's extended metaphor (that armed conflict is like sports). The fourth line here—"And who thinks he'd rather sit tight?"—represents the other side of the juxtaposition, setting up a choice between excitement and boredom, bravery and cowardice, action and action ("sitting tight").

It's also worth noting how the bulk of the lines are weighted towards the first side of the juxtaposition, the positive case for joining the army—it's clear, then, where the poem stands on the issue.

This pattern repeats exactly in the next four lines, and the four that follow that—three lines talking up armed conflict, and one portraying staying at home as dull and morally wrong. In lines 7 and 8, the poem uses antithesis through the parallel grammatical structure:

> Who wants a turn to himself in the show?
> And who wants a seat in the stand?

This heightens the sense that the reader *has* to make a choice.

Finally, the poem contains a kind of formal juxtaposition too. The first twelve lines all take the form of rhetorical questions, while the lines that conclude the poem provide the definite answer (and call-to-arms).

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-17

PERSONIFICATION

Personification occurs once in "Who's For the Game?," right at the end of the poem:

> Your country is up to her neck in a fight,
> And she's looking and calling for you.

Here, Britain is presented as a woman who needs "lads" to fight on her behalf—a fight she is already "up to her neck" in. In other words, the nation is a damsel in distress who needs a knight—or thousands of knights—in shining armor to come to her rescue.

This personification—which is also a type of metaphor—contributes to the poem's overall argument: that war isn't something to be scared of—in fact, it's fun and exciting (more akin to a sports match than a matter of life or death). The excitement implied by the extended sporting metaphor (the "game") subtly transforms into a kind of sexual excitement, subtly playing on the sexual appetites and instincts of young male readers.

This personification also echoes a famous poster from the time which told people "your country needs you"—though a more subtle example, "need" is a human feeling. Here, the woman is directly "looking and calling" for the reader—implying a kind of reciprocated attraction.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 16-17:** "Your country is up to her neck in a fight, / And she's looking and calling for you."

RHETORICAL QUESTION

Rhetorical questions are an integral part of "Who's for the Game?" In fact, there are nine questions in total—over half the poem! They make the poem sound like an interrogation, as though each question is like the prod to the reader's chest—asking them if they will put themselves on the line for their country.

The answers to the questions are meant to be obvious—that is, only a coward would "sit tight," or in "the stand," or "lie low." Anyone with an ounce of bravery and dignity would, according to the poem, sign up to fight in the war—which, besides, is portrayed as something fun and exciting here.

Rhetorical questions are so important to the poem that they make up the entirety of the first 12 lines. After this, the poem provides its own answer to the preceding questions. Indeed, it presumes the knowledge of the reader's answer—that is, of any young male reader at the time. The answer, of course, is to go to war—and the poem switches from question to answer in order to make the full force of its argument take effect. Framing the argument this way makes the ending more dramatic, aiming to stir up emotions and a positive response in the reader.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

VOCABULARY

Toe the line (Line 5) - This means to go along with orders or instructions, here evoking a sense of duty and honor. It can also mean to be ready at the starting line in a race, implying the young men's eagerness to fight.

Turn (Line 7) - This relates to the "show" mentioned in the same line. A turn is like an act or part performed in a play, or in other stage-based entertainment like music hall.

Shoulders (Line 10) - As the word suggests, to shoulder something simply means to carry something on your shoulders.

Lads (Line 13) - A casual term for young men.

Up to her neck (Line 16) - "Up to her neck" is an idiom that means to be in deep or overwhelmed by something; here, the country is deep into the war.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Who's for the Game" is a formal poem, in keeping with Jessie Pope's poetry more generally.

There are two main ways to analyze the form here. Firstly, the poem can be thought of as having two main sections—the question section and the answer section. Lines 1-12 are *all* rhetorical questions presenting a choice between the excitement of war (characterized as a kind of sports game) and the boredom/cowardliness of non-participation. The concluding lines that follow the question section provide the poem's emphatic answer—there is "only one course to pursue," one legitimate answer to be given.

This gives the poem a forceful ending that intensifies its pressure on the reader—particularly the young male reader at the time—to sign up to the British army and fight in the First World War.

The other way of view this poem is as four quatrains—indeed, sometimes the poem is published this way (and may have been published this way originally). This would mean that lines 13 and 14 as written here would form one line ("Come along, lads – But you'll come on all right –"), maintaining an ABAB rhyme scheme throughout the poem. The similar division between question and answer would still apply. In either case, the steadiness of the poem's form reflects the confidence of its speaker anbd message.

METER

"Who's for the Game?" mostly uses anapests throughout. This means most feet follow an unstressed-unstressed-**stressed**, da-da-DUM, rhythm. This echoes another very famous poem about war: "The Destruction of Sennacherib" by Lord Byron.

The anapests evoke the sensation of galloping horses, imbuing the poem with energy and forward momentum

The poem has regular substitutions, however. A number of the lines, for example, start with an extra stressed syllable—like the first line:

> Who's | for the game, | the big- | gest that's played,

This line also substitutes an iamb for the anapest in the third foot ("the big").

Generally speaking, the poem alternates four-beat lines (tetrameter) with three-beat lines (trimeter). The second line is an example of the latter (the first foot here is another iamb, however):

> The red | crashing game | of a fight?

Notice how the meter, already established by the second line, demands that "crashing" is unstressed (while the first syllable would normally be stressed). The meter, then, is complicated on a technical level in terms of scansion—there are numerous plausible ways of scanning it. But, it sounds very simple when read out loud. Try it!

This simplicity gives the poem two important attributes. Firstly, as noted above, it gives the poem a forward momentum that makes its argument—that young men should join the army—all the more forceful. The poem also has a playful, almost nursery-rhyme sound to it. This makes the poem easier to memorize, perhaps useful for what is essentially a piece of propaganda.

RHYME SCHEME

"Who's for the Game?" has a regular rhyme scheme throughout. Put simply, it's just alternating rhyme:

> ABAB

There's a new set of rhymes every four lines (the poem also neatly divides into four quatrains if line 13 and 14 are counted as one line, as they are in some versions). The main effect is to give the poem a breezy, almost casual tone. In fact, it even sounds a bit like a nursery rhyme.

Overall, this supports the poem's argument that war is nothing to be afraid of—it's just like taking part in some kind of sports match. Indeed, the playfulness of the rhymes conveys the way that—according to the poem—war is actually "fun"!

Accordingly, most critics feel that this poem doesn't give much, if any, sense of the realities of war—and that this particular rhyme scheme seems incongruous with the subject. That said, it's worth remembering that the target audience is young men reading newspapers in 1915—not necessarily poetry lovers. Accordingly, the rhymes also give the poem a sense of forceful persuasiveness—which is, after all, what the poem is aiming for.

SPEAKER

There is no specified speaker in this poem. Essentially, the voice reads like informal propaganda, constructing an argument imploring the reader to join the army. The poem asks question after question, juxtaposing the supposed excitement and fun of going to war with the mundane cowardice of staying behind.

Through these repeated rhetorical questions, the poem becomes almost like an interrogation—with the speaker being asked what is essentially the same question again and again. The speaker tries to persuade the poem's target audience—young British men in 1915 (and their families perhaps)—that they'd be a fool to miss out on going to war. They try to repackage war through metaphor, making out to be more like a sports match than real danger. In line 14, the poem uses the colloquial term, "lads," to appeal directly to its target to its demographic.

SETTING

The first thing to note about the setting here is that, though the poem is classed as First World War poetry, it's manifestly *not* set on the battlefield. That is, the poem makes no attempt to capture the real horrors of war—the horrific onslaught on the senses, the psychological trauma, injury, and death. While the poem was published early on in the war—before the true tragedy had fully unfolded—it doesn't make any attempt to engage with accounts of earlier wars either (e.g. the Boer War).

With this in mind, then, it's worth considering *why* the poem might not let on fully about the reality of war. Perhaps it's merely that the author didn't know about them, or maybe it's because the poem has one real aim. Published in a newspaper, it's a direct call-to-arms to young man asking—and pressuring—them to sign up for the war. Accordingly, the poem presents armed conflict as more of a sports game than a battle of life and death. Through its direct and persistent questioning, the poem can also be thought of as set in the gap between text and reader—a gap that it tries to narrow as much as possible through its interrogation-like tone.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Who's for the Game" was published early on in the First World War, which ran from 1914 to 1918. Pope's poem is a direct appeal to the British public, asking young men—"lads"—to enlist in the army and go off to war. As with many of Pope's poems, it was first published in a national newspaper—Pope published frequently in papers such as the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express*. The poem was subsequently published in Pope's

second collection of war poems, titled simply *More War Poems* (the first was *War Poems*). Her poems were popular at the time of initial publication, tapping into an early and sincere enthusiasm for the war, which many people thought would be over quickly.

Of course, the war was not over quickly—and was full of unspeakable horror and tragedy. Accordingly, Pope's war poetry appeared less and less relevant, to the point that nowadays it seems glib and flippant. Indeed, it is often taught in schools as an example of a First World War poem that specifically *doesn't* deal in the realities of war.

To best observe this distinction, readers should compare Pope's work with war poets like Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. Pope perhaps shares more in common with the similarly jingoistic Rupert Brooke. Brooke's "The Soldier," for example, reads with a similar patriotic tone.

Pope did, however, have an important role in perhaps the most famous WWI poem, Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est." This vital poem reflects on the lies told to young soldiers during the war—that it is somehow "sweet and right to die for your country." The poem was in part inspired—or negatively inspired—by Pope's newspaper poems, and was even dedicated to her in an early draft (a dedication that was deleted before publication).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1915, it still was not yet compulsory for young British men to join the war effort. Instead, the British strategy was instead to appeal top the consciences of the target demographic through advertising and information (and propaganda). Indeed, this poem certainly echoes the tone of one of the most famous war posters of all time, which featured the figure of Lord Kitchener, the secretary of State for War, pointing at the viewer and telling them "your country needs you."

Pope's poem strikes a similarly direct tone. It's also worth noting that this was published in a newspaper, the dominant media format of the age (well before television or smartphones!). Newspapers thus played an integral role in shaping national attitudes to the war—and Pope's apparent enthusiasm for the conflict was not out of step with much of the early response more broadly.

The First World War 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.

Pope's portrayal of war in this poem was so far off the mark as to be rather humorous if it weren't so tragic. Life for soldiers was not one of "fun" and excitement, but terror and trauma. The war finally ended on November 11, 1918, with the surrender of Germany.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Jessie Pope in the 21st Century — A BBC article about Pope's current reputation, particularly in the way her work is taught in British schools. (https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-32298697)
- The Poetry of World War I — A valuable resource from the Poetry Foundation covering a range of WWI poets. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/70139/the-poetry-of-world-war-i)
- Pope at the British Library — An interesting article about Pope's poetry. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/jessie-popes-war-poems#)
- Lord Kitchener's Pointing Finger — Information about a poster used in Britain to recruit young men into the army during WWI. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lord_Kitchener_Wants_You)
- Wilfred Owen's Response — The text of one of the greatest of all war poems, Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est." Owen wrote this poem in part as a response to and furious refutation to writers who glorified war—writers like Jessie Pope. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46560/dulce-et-decorum-est)

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Howard, James. "*Who's for the Game?*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 7 Jan 2020. Web. 29 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Howard, James. "*Who's for the Game?*." LitCharts LLC, January 7, 2020. Retrieved April 29, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/jessie-pope/who-s-for-the-game.