In Flanders Fields

POEM TEXT

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie,
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

SUMMARY

The speaker describes the poppies (beautiful red flowers) that grow in a place called Flanders fields. Along with the poppies, there are rows of crosses marking graves throughout the fields. The speaker also notes that larks (a particular kind of bird) fly high above the fields, singing their songs. However, the birds' songs can barely be heard on the ground below, because the noise of guns—most likely from some kind of battle—is too loud.

The speaker then reveals that they are actually multiple speakers, a group of people who are all dead and presumably died in this location. Until recently, the speakers were alive, experiencing the beauties of sunrise and sunset, as well as loving relationships with other people. Now, the speakers are dead and buried in Flanders fields.

The speakers go on to ask the reader to continue their fight. They liken their struggle to a torch that they are now passing off to the people who are still alive, because they themselves cannot hold it anymore. They ask that the reader take this responsibility seriously. The speakers conclude by saying that if the reader betrays the speakers by not continuing their fight, the speakers will never be peaceful in death, even though the field where they lie is covered in beautiful flowers.

THEMES

LIFE, DEATH, AND NATURE

In the poem "In Flanders Fields," the speakers describe the site of a recent World War I battle, emphasizing both the spot's natural beauty and the devastation of the lives that were lost there. By bringing together two seemingly opposite interpretations of the same place, the speakers illustrate how life and death are always in balance with each other, even in tragic situations. Additionally, the speakers suggest that the steady cycles of the natural world reflect this balance and provide a way for humans to come to terms with tragedy and death.

Death is a vividly present force throughout the poem. The speaker immediately describes the fields of Flanders, Belgium, as covered in crosses marking the graves of soldiers buried there, an image which emphasizes how deeply death has marked this spot. At the end of the first stanza, the mention of "the guns below" takes this initial impression further, indicating that the deadly conflict taking place in the fields is ongoing. The second stanza reveals that the speaker is in fact "the Dead"; that is, the speaker (using the first-person plural voice of "we") is actually a group of speakers, all of whom died in this same place. Furthermore, the second stanza makes it clear that these deaths were untimely and tragic. The phrase "short days ago" emphasizes how recently these deaths occurred, while the warm imagery of "dawn," "sunset," and "love" underscores just how much the speakers lost when they died. This sense of death without peace continues throughout the poem's final stanza, with restless imagery such as "failing hands" and dead that "shall not sleep."

However, the speakers balance these impressions of tragedy with ones of beauty and calm by making frequent reference to the stable cycles of nature. Even in the first line, "the poppies" are the dominant image, intermingling with "the crosses" in the second line and creating a sense that something beautiful and alive has grown from the deaths described. Poppies have been used as a symbol of rest and death since antiquity, so the choice of these flowers in particular highlights the close link between life and death; they are vividly alive even as their presence hints at death. "The larks" and their "singing" also suggest that nature has a powerful life force that extends far beyond the tragedy of the battlefield; note that the larks are in "the sky," up high enough that their song is "scarce heard amid the guns below." The second stanza also underscores that the balance of the natural world continues even in the face of human atrocity. The speakers' references to "dawn" and "sunset" remind the reader

that even though "the Dead" can no longer experience these wonders, the sun still continues to rise and set in an endless cycle. Even in the face of the restlessness of the dead who "shall not sleep," the poppies still grow in the second-to-last line, an image that echoes the first line and emphasizes how beautiful natural forces such as the growth of flowers will always persist, even (and perhaps especially) in the face of death.

While the speakers in no way deny the power of death—after all, they are themselves "the Dead"—they ultimately make the point that death is only one necessary part of a larger system that is inherently balanced. Death may not be peaceful, but it is nonetheless natural, and the speakers suggest that by noticing the never-ending cycles of the natural world, readers can learn to appreciate the deep beauty and ongoing life that coexist even with tragic death.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 2-3
- Lines 3-5
- Lines 6-8
- Line 7
- Line 9
- Lines 14-15

WAR AND RESPONSIBILITY

"In Flanders Fields" is written in the voice of a group of soldiers who have recently died in a World War I battle. By speaking as a group and asking the reader to join in their struggle, these speakers suggest that war is a shared responsibility that affects everyone. Many critics read this poem as a straightforward romanticization of war, group effort, and soldiers' sacrifice, but at the same time, it also indicates that war is a destructive phenomenon that interrupts the natural order of things. Ultimately, the speakers do not resolve the question of what, exactly, their struggle is; readers are left to decide whether the speakers are asking them to join the war or work to stop it.

The speakers—who collectively call themselves "the Dead"—begin by describing their circumstances to the reader. The second stanza in particular contains vivid descriptions of what the speakers have sacrificed in the name of war, noting in lines 7 and 8 that they have given up even such essential things as sunrises and love. By bringing the reader into their personal experience in this way, the speakers create a sense that war is communal, and that everyone in a society at war shares the soldiers' fate in some sense. The final stanza makes this point explicit, as the speakers ask the reader to "take up [their] quarrel with the foe" and state that they "shall not sleep" if the reader doesn't carry on the fight that they began. Again, it seems crucially important to the speakers that the battle be waged by everyone, not just soldiers.

However, the speakers also depict war as horrific and senseless, even as they emphasize that everyone must share its burdens. In the first stanza, they make it clear that war overshadows everything, noting that even as birds continue to sing ("larks still bravely singing"), the noise of "the guns below" makes it hard for humans to access such beauty. The loss described in the second stanza can also be interpreted as a condemnation of war's senseless losses. While the experiences that the speakers have lost may glorify their sacrifice, they also demonstrate how war rips humans away from the natural cycles of "dawn" and "sunset," implying that war exists essentially outside nature, as a kind of abomination. Even the poem's meter breaks down at the words "In Flanders Fields" in lines 9 and 15, departing from the steady iambic tetrameter of the other lines. It seems, then, that the speakers may actually see this battlefield as the site of a breakdown in the world's natural order.

In light of this second interpretation, the speakers' request in the final stanza seems very different. If the speakers are actually trying to convince readers that war is an atrocity, then the responsibility symbolized by "the torch" might be more complicated than simply continuing to fight the same battles. Perhaps the metaphorical "torch" is actually the speakers' attempt to shed some light on the horrors of war, and perhaps opposing "the foe" means putting a stop to tragic losses like the ones the speakers suffered. The speakers leave this question open; it's ultimately uncertain whether they want the reader to fight for the war or against it. But the one thing they do make clear is that the reader has a responsibility to decide. The call to "hold [the torch] high" demands that readers recognize their own complicity and responsibility in war, no matter which interpretation of the speakers' "quarrel" they choose.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Line 5
- Lines 6-9
- Lines 10-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place;

The opening lines of "In Flanders Fields" introduce the setting of a field in a northern region of Belgium, where beautiful flowers ("poppies") grow amid many graves ("the crosses, row on row"). This description of the landscape sets up the poem's thematic focus on the coexistence of life and death, as well as

nature's role in mediating and illuminating that connection.

The very first line introduces the key symbol of the poppy. Poppies are a traditional symbol of rest and death, but here, they also demonstrate the literal truth that the natural world continues to produce new life, no matter the circumstances. The flowers themselves, then, are the poem's first hint that life and death are intimately connected and perhaps even inseparable. The contrasting image of the "crosses" reinforces this idea; the speakers use the repetition of "row on row" to create the sense that the graves here are endless, just like the flowers. Additionally, the enjambment at the end of line 1 suggests a very close link between the two images, suggesting that the forces of life and death work together to create overall balance in the natural world.

These first lines also set up the steady meter and rhyme scheme that characterize most of the poem. They all feature unbroken iambic tetrameter, which gives the poem a sense of reliable forward momentum and reflects its thematic focus on nature's cycles. However, the instances of caesura here also interrupt this steady rhythm and hint that the reality the poem describes may be more complicated than the simple meter suggests. In particular, the semicolon in the middle of line 3 grabs the reader's attention and signals the somewhat abrupt change in perspective that will occur over the course of the next few lines.

Finally, the word "our" in line 3 suggests that the speaker is actually more than one individual, a point that will become crucial as the reader learns more about the speakers and their purpose across the poem.

LINES 3-5

and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

Coming on the heels of the caesura in line 3, the remainder of the first stanza signals new thematic complexity and brings the reader into direct contact with the ongoing war that occasions the poem. While the first lines set the scene and establish a somewhat abstract sense of the interplay between life and death in this location, these lines provide a more immediate, tangible sense of how those dynamics are continuing to play out.

On the one hand, lines 3 and 4 reinforce the notion that nature's cycles are a powerful, never-ending source of hope. The "larks" that fly above Flanders fields are a kind of songbird that symbolize the sunrise in some mythology and literature, and their presence in the sky above the complex web of "crosses" and "poppies" suggests that the natural world exerts a positive force that suffuses and transcends everything. It's also notable that the speakers use personification to describe the larks singing "bravely"; that the larks could possess such a human quality underscores the idea that nature and regular human life are more closely connected than the reader may have thought.

However, line 5 presents a marked contrast to this sense of connection. Using the metonym "guns" as a stand-in for the broader notion of battle, the speakers introduce the reader to the idea that the war is still happening. Furthermore, it's loud and forceful enough that it can dim the hopeful influence of things like the larks, which are "scarce heard" in the face of this new threat. It seems, then, that the reader won't be able to escape this conflict—a point that the speakers address explicitly in the third stanza. By using the metonym of "guns" to represents all the facets of battle, the speakers also emphasize the violent, mechanical aspects of the war rather than the human, emotional ones. This choice frames war as something essentially separate from the organic cycles of nature described earlier in the stanza, and something that has a great deal of power in its own right.

The combination of caesura and enjambment at the end of line 4 also highlights this tension between the steady rhythms of nature and the destructive interruption of war. The caesura before the word "fly" works against the line's overall iambic tetrameter, emphasizing the drama of this flight, while the enjambment leaves the word untethered at the end of the line, as if it could continue flying forever. But then the next line immediately brings this flight to a halt, as the speakers suddenly turn to discussing the ground rather than the sky. The combination of these poetic devices alongside the unexpected turn in content works to show the reader that while nature's cycles are constant, war is also a significant force to be reckoned with.

LINE 6

We are the Dead.

This short, declarative statement at the beginning of line 6 has a number of significant effects. First, it reveals the speakers' true identity to readers for the first time: the reader now learns that the poem is being related by a group of individuals, all of whom are dead. Additionally, the speaker learns that these people (almost certainly soldiers) are buried in Flanders fields—the words "our place" in line 3 make sense now, as the reader sees that the graves actually belong to the speakers. Though the theme of death was implied previously, it's now abundantly clear; every word of the poem is colored by the experience of death, since dead people are the ones speaking.

Next, the decision to end this sentence in the middle of the line, with the poem's most forceful instance of caesura, forces the reader to confront the fact of death's absolute finality. Although death may be a part of ongoing natural cycles, as indicated in the previous stanza, it is nonetheless permanent for those who experience it. The dramatic caesura stops the reader in their tracks, just as death has stopped the speakers in theirs. In addition to making the reader experience some form

of the full stop that the speakers experience, the period in line 6 also provides space for a pause in which readers reflect on the revelation that the speakers are actually "the Dead."

Finally, presenting the poem from the shared perspective of many different people—rather than in the voice of just one dead soldier, for instance—emphasizes the extent to which war is essentially a shared experience. The speakers are all individuals, but they have come together to bear responsibility for the war and, even more importantly, to convince the reader to do the same. Though the speakers don't explicitly call for the reader's support until the third stanza, the use of the first-person plural voice starting in line 6 introduces the idea that where war is concerned, many voices must learn to speak as one.

LINES 6-8

Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved,

After the revelation that the speakers are "the Dead," they go on to describe all of the valuable things that they have lost, from natural wonders such as seeing "sunset glow" to the essential human experience of love. The reader also learns here that the speakers were alive "short days ago"—that is, they died quite recently.

One of the most significant functions of these lines is how they work to bring the reader into the experience of the speakers' loss and emphasize that its depth is truly beyond measure. The use of asyndeton in line 7 going into line 8 causes the items in the speakers' list of things lost to tumble over each other and even seem to blend together. The alliteration of the repeated "w" sound in line 7 (in the words "we," "dawn," "saw," and "glow") enhances this effect, suggesting subtly that these individual words are just various small facets of one bigger, all-encompassing loss. The reader is left with the impression that the losses the speakers name here are actually only a few items in a much longer list. Additionally, the choice to name such essential aspects of life creates an emotional bond with the reader, since nearly everyone has experienced the basic joys of the sun's movement and loving relationships with other people. Accordingly, the speakers force the reader to experience a form of the speakers' own despair, which again highlights how war is essentially a shared experience. In other words, no one is exempt from feeling the burdens of war, even though some people (like the speakers) die as soldiers and others (like the readers) don't.

At the same time, the inclusion of the imagery around sunrise and sunset also reminds the reader of the ongoing power of nature's cycles, which was established in the previous stanza. That is, the losses these soldiers have experienced may be tragic, but they haven't interrupted the balance that suffuses the natural world, and perhaps readers can take comfort in that broader sense of stability.

LINES 8-9

and now we lie,
In Flanders fields.

The list of all the joys that the speakers have lost comes to an abrupt stop in the middle of line 8, with another one of the forceful caesurae that appear throughout the poem. Within the space of one line, the speakers go from the dynamic life indicated by "loved and were loved" to the motionless death of "and now we lie," with the caesura marking this sudden transition. The alliteration of the repeated "L" sound across both halves of line 8 (in the words "loved," "loved," and "lie") also creates the impression that the boundary between these two very different states of being may actually be a thin one; it's almost as if the speakers slipped from "love" to "lie" before they knew what was happening. Taken together, the poetic devices in this line highlight both how death can connect seamlessly with life and how it can occur quickly, without any warning.

Line 9 seems at first to simply provide detail about where the speakers are, now that this change has occurred. However, it actually plays several important roles in the development of the poem's themes and key questions. First, it serves as the second instance of the poem's repeating refrain, a feature that is typical of the rondeau form (the first instance occurs in line 1, and the third instance is in line 15). While the words "In Flanders fields" in line 1 describe a beautiful natural location, this second repetition of the refrain has a very different meaning: it reveals "Flanders fields" as the site of the speakers' deep loss and devastation. Furthermore, the "L" sound in both words calls back to the alliteration in the previous line, linking the location itself to the speakers' swift transition into death. In this way, line 9's focus on death effectively balances out line 1's focus on life, providing an explicit example within the poem of how life and death exist in a steady equilibrium.

However, line 9 also hints at a possible breakdown in that sense of balance. The refrains of lines 9 and 15 are the only times that the poem's meter deviates from iambic tetrameter, with only two iambs in the line instead of four:

In Flanders fields.

This notable change from the steady meter present in the rest of the poem suggests that "Flanders fields" may also be the site of some deviation from normalcy. The speakers themselves are present there, and yet the reader knows from line 7 that they no longer "[feel] dawn" or "[see] sunset glow." It may be then, that the devastation of war works against the steady cycles of nature in some way, just as this line alters the poem's seemingly constant meter. From these lines, it's not quite clear whether the speakers view their own deaths as continuations of nature's equilibrium or interruptions of it, but line 9 suggests that either

interpretation is plausible.

LINES 10-12

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.

With the start of the final stanza, the speakers turn to addressing the reader directly. They ask that the reader continue the fight ("quarrel") that they, the speakers, have begun, dramatizing this transition of responsibility through the symbol of a torch changing hands.

In these lines, the speakers use a number of tactics to emphasize to the reader that the stakes of this battle are high and that the reader has no choice but to participate. First, the speakers employ the metonym of "failing hands" to refer to themselves in the process of passing responsibility to the reader. The choice of such a specific, bodily image to stand in for the speakers themselves has the effect of humanizing the speakers and brings to mind the idea of a promise, almost as if the speakers were inviting the reader to shake hands to seal a deal. This metonym, then, strengthens the bond between speakers and reader and prepares the reader to accept the challenge that the speakers issue.

Second, the combination of enjambment and caesura in line 11 leading into line 12 also underscores the seriousness of the speakers' demand. The lack of breaks in line 11 allows that line to build momentum toward the word "throw," giving the impression that the torch is actually flying through the air, full of potential. But then, the semicolon two words into line 12 abruptly halts this motion, effectively stopping the torch and firmly passing it off to the reader. It seems from this combination of poetic devices that the reader has no choice but to accept this responsibility, an effect that again highlights how no one can avoid taking on the shared burden of war.

These three lines are also the basis for many critics' understanding of this poem as a celebration or glorification of war. On the surface, this interpretation seems somewhat accurate; the symbol of the torch in particular brings to mind the excitement and competition of a relay race, which in turn suggests that war may be a kind of game to be won in the name of glory. However, note that the speakers never actually specify who "the foe" is or explain the nature of "the quarrel." Given the poem's previous hints at the devastating, even unnatural consequences of war, it also seems plausible that the speakers are trying to convey the idea that the war should be stopped rather than continued. Considering that second interpretation, it could be that the torch's symbolism actually has more to do with shedding light than with victory and competition. Perhaps what the speakers are really asking readers to do is hear their tragic story and use it as a rationale for ending the ongoing conflict.

Because "the torch" is presented as a metaphor rather than a specific, literal demand, the speakers are able to leave this question option. One thing they do make clear, however, is that the reader must take some action; they must "hold [the torch] high," regardless of what their interpretation of that "torch" is. The alliterative "H" sounds of "hold it high" emphasize the significance of this demand, as does the caesura that sets up this phrase. The reader is left with a sense that they cannot avoid choosing an interpretation; the speakers' only clear demand is that no one should avoid responsibility for war's serious consequences.

LINES 13-15

If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

These final lines emphasize again how important it is that the reader meets the speakers' demands, as the speakers note that they will never rest ("we shall not sleep") if the reader betrays them ("If ye break faith with us who die"). The idea that the speakers may never be truly at peace, even after undergoing all of the devastating loss described earlier in the poem, highlights how devastating war can be. But at the same time, the notion that this restlessness will only happen if readers ignore the speakers also suggests that readers themselves may have the power to heal some of that devastation. Again, the speakers insist that readers must take an active role in accepting responsibility for the war, even though the poem doesn't state for certain what that role should be.

Line 14 also reintroduces the symbol of poppies from line 1, thus returning to the theme of nature's beauty and constancy even in the face of death and tragedy. The poppies in this second appearance remind the reader not to despair over the natural cycles of life and death, but they also make it clear that fallen soldiers like the speakers can never be forgotten; after all, the poppies grow from the same soil in which the soldiers are buried, and the flowers' blood-red color is a visible reminder of the blood shed in this location.

The third and final repetition of the poem's refrain ("In Flanders fields") in line 15 also emphasizes the ongoing interconnection of life and death. Where the first repetition (in line 1) focused on the vitality of Flanders fields, and the second (in line 9) focused on the death present there, this third repetition brings these two realities together. On the one hand, it may be true that the dead "shall not sleep," but on the other hand, poppies *still* grow; "Flanders fields" is ultimately the site of both life and death in equal measure.

Finally, the refrain here also breaks the poem's otherwise constant meter of iambic tetrameter, just as it does in line 9. As in that previous instance, the interruption in the steady meter may hint at the way that war has interrupted nature's steady equilibrium. Perhaps because readers—and more generally, people who are still alive—have not yet completed the

speakers' fight, the poem concludes on an unsettled note, subtly nudging readers to comply with the speakers' demands and take responsible action.

SYMBOLS

POPPIES

Poppies are a kind of flower that, though beautiful, often symbolize death for two reasons: poppies can be used to create opium, which causes deep sleep, and they are commonly blood-red in color. In the poem "In Flanders Fields," poppies do symbolize death, but importantly, they also represent the close link between death and life, as well as the way that nature can illuminate that link.

In the first stanza, the speakers use an image of poppies "blow[ing]" in the wind to introduce the idea that abundant life exists even in a place where many people have died tragic deaths. Death (evoked by "the crosses" "that mark" the graves of dead soldiers) has clearly not stopped the beauty of the natural world from flourishing, and the poppies represent that ongoing cycle of life. Considering poppies' common connotation as a symbol of death, it seems that the speakers may even be suggesting that it is impossible to separate life from death; after all, the bodies of the dead soldiers nourish the soil that allows the poppies to grow.

In the last stanza, the speakers return to the image of the poppies as a contrast to the possibility that they themselves may never "sleep." That is, the speakers acknowledge that while death may never be peaceful, the poppies are going to keep growing no matter what. This contrast of the restless speakers alongside the beautiful flowers positions the poppies as a symbol of nature's endless, stable cycles. By observing natural forces like the poppies, the speakers seem to say, the reader may be able to reckon with the eternal balance between life and death.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "poppies," " blow"
- **Line 14:** "poppies grow"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration occurs several times throughout "In Flanders Fields." In each case, it draws particular attention to an emotionally charged moment and reinforces the importance of each one. Alliteration is most noticeable in the title of the poem and the lines that repeat it (1, 9, and 15). "Flanders fields" refers to the geographic site of a World War I battle where many soldiers died. By incorporating the forceful "f" sound into both words of this location, the speakers emphasize the place's importance and also repeatedly mimic the sound of an exhalation, which subtly hints at the dying breaths of the soldiers who lost their lives there.

The poem's other instances of alliteration also occur at emotional peaks of the speakers' story. The repeated "aw" sound of "dawn" and "saw" in line 7, as well as the triple "s" of "saw sunset" adds a sense of motion and liveliness to that line, which reflects how vivid the speakers' lives once were and creates a stark contrast to the death described in the next lines. The repeating "l" sound of "loved," "loved," and "lie" in line 8 illustrates how important love was in the dead soldiers' lives, as well as how thin the line is between life and death, as "loved" rushes quickly into "lie."

Finally, the breathy "h" sounds of "hold it high" in line 12 highlight the importance of this instruction and suggest that readers, like the speakers, will have to sacrifice their own breath in this ongoing struggle.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Flanders fields"
- **Line 7:** "dawn," "saw sunset"
- **Line 8:** " Loved," "loved," "lie"
- **Line 9:** "Flanders fields"
- **Line 12:** "hold," "high"
- **Line 15:** "Flanders fields"

ASYNDETON

The poem employs asyndeton once, in line 7 through the beginning of line 8. Here, the speakers list everything that they've lost in the "short days" since they died. The choice to present this list without the conjunction "and" adds a sense of urgency to the statement, as if the speakers can't wait to share their memories of everything they can no longer experience. Imagine if line 7 read:

> "We lived, felt dawn, **and** saw sunset glow,"

The "and" slows the line down and makes it seem as if the speakers are calmly describing their circumstances, whereas leaving it out gives the reader the impression that the speakers are somewhat desperate to convey their thoughts as quickly as possible.

Additionally, leaving out "and" until the middle of line 8 implies that the list may actually be endless; the items mentioned are only a few of many others that the speakers could easily go on naming. In other words, they haven't *just* lost "dawn," "sunset," and love; they've also lost other wonders that are too numerous to list. By using asyndeton, the speakers create the sense of an enormous, limitless loss in only a couple of lines.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow, / Loved"

CAESURA

Caesura appears several times throughout the poem. Often, it creates a sense of interrupted motion that goes against the steady meter featured in most of the poem's lines. For example, in line 3, the semicolon after "place" abruptly alters the poem's focus, shifting it from the ground (where the "poppies" and "crosses" are) to the sky (where the "larks" are). In turn, this shift marks a contrast between the two realities present in one location, underscoring the thematic point that life and death coexist in surprising ways. This same sense of a sudden change in perspective occurs in line 8, with the caesura marking the transition between the vibrant memory of life ("love and were loved") and the complete stillness of death ("and now we lie").

In line 4, the caesura after "singing" creates an even more dramatic effect, leaving the word "fly" on its own at the end of the line. Combined with the enjambment of line 4 going into line 5, it's almost as if the word itself were flying. This sense of boundless motion makes the sudden impact of line 5 even more powerful; the reader is forced to abandon the flying birds above and return to the harsh reality of the "the guns below." A similar sense of symbolic flight tempered by reality comes up in line 12, with the caesura after "torch." The word "throw" in line 11 evokes an image of the "torch" suspended in mid-air, full of potential, but the caesura in 12 arrests that motion and effectively settles the "torch" in the hands of the reader ("be yours to hold it high"). Again, the reader is suddenly forced to confront the reality and responsibility of war.

Finally, the poem's most forceful use of caesura comes in line 6, with the period after the word "Dead." Whereas the instances of caesura that use commas and semicolons function to alter and shift the poem's motion, this use of a period stops that motion altogether. By forcing a complete halt just a few words into the second stanza, this caesura demonstrates how unexpected and complete death can be; it can occur anywhere, and it is impossible to argue with. The caesura in line 12 highlights exactly how serious the speakers' circumstances are, while also giving the reader a moment to pause and reflect on the gravity of the speakers' true identity.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** ","
- **Line 3:** ";"
- **Line 4:** "," ","
- **Line 6:** "."
- **Line 7:** "," ","
- **Line 8:** ","
- **Line 12:** ";"
- **Line 14:** ","

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment occurs frequently throughout this poem. In many cases, it works to create a sense of smooth connection between ideas and images, which heightens the poem's overall theme of a close cyclical relationship between life and death. For example, the enjambment in line 1 leading into line 2 connects the lively image of the blowing poppies with the solemn one of the still, orderly crosses. The final instance, in line 14 leading into line 15, echoes this same effect and adds the sense of a repeating cycle, as the language from line 1 reappears in these closing lines.

In combination with caesura, enjambment also functions to create a sense of expansive motion that is ultimately interrupted by the realities of war and human responsibility. In line 4, it occurs right after a caesura, catching readers up in the dynamic word "fly," only to bring them immediately back to reality with the image of "guns" in the next line. The enjambment at the ends of line 6 and line 11 uses an inverted structure to create a similar effect; in both of those cases, the corresponding caesura occurs two words into the following line, after the enjambment rather than before. In line 6, the enjambment makes the potential of "short days ago" feel limitless, but the caesura in the next line after "we lived" makes it immediately clear that that potential has actually reached its end already. Similarly, the enjambment after "throw" in line 11 suggests that the "the torch" is airborne and might end up anywhere, but then the caesura in line 12 stops this sense of possibility and makes it clear that the torch now belongs to the reader ("be yours to hold it high"). In all of these cases, the combination of enjambment and caesura creates the effect of potential cut short, much as the lives of the speakers were also cut short.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "blow / Between"
- **Lines 3-4:** "sky / The larks"
- **Lines 4-5:** "fly / Scarce"
- **Lines 6-7:** "ago / We lived"
- **Lines 11-12:** "throw / The torch"
- **Lines 13-14:** "die / We"
- **Lines 14-15:** "grow / In"

METAPHOR

The torch in line 12 is the poem's only metaphor. The speakers are not literally tossing a torch to the reader; rather, they are evoking the image of the torch as a stand-in for the idea of passing off their struggle (the "quarrel" in line 10) to someone

else. In other words, the speakers (the dead soldiers of Flanders fields) have completed their part of the fight and are now asking those who still live to continue that same fight ("Take up our quarrel with the foe").

Using a metaphor rather than a literal description of this ongoing struggle allows for a nuanced interpretation of what, exactly, this fight might be. On the one hand, the torch seems to be a straightforward way to visualize passing off a responsibility, as runners in a relay race might pass off a baton. This would suggest that, according to the speakers, shared responsibility is an essential component of war. The speakers may be "failing" in that they have died, but the reader can still "hold [the torch] high" and carry on the shared fight.

On the other hand, the torch's association with creating light implies that the speakers might actually want the reader to shed light on the true nature of war, by listening to the tragic story the speakers tell. In that sense, the poem itself acts as a kind of torch, shedding light on the intense suffering and loss these soldiers have gone through. Thus, the reader "hold[ing] [the torch] high" might mean remembering those horrors and working to prevent more people from meeting the speakers' sad fate. By presenting this tension in the figurative language of metaphor, the speaker is able to leave the question open and force readers to settle on their own interpretations of the torch and what it really means to "hold it high."

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "torch"

METONYMY

The poem contains two instances of metonymy. In line 5, "guns" are a stand-in for the broader concept of battle and war. In line 11, the speakers use the word "hands" to refer to their own agency as people.

In line 5, metonymy allows the speakers to emphasize the inhuman, violent side of war. Using a more general word like "fight" or "war" would have maintained the line's meter just as well as "guns" does. However, choosing the word "guns" forces the reader to focus on the destructive weapons themselves, rather than the people holding them or the broader meaning and context of the war. Through this choice, the speakers imply that the essence of war is inhuman and mechanical, and that it is in some way incompatible with the natural world represented by the "larks" flying above.

In line 11, metonymy has a similar but reversed effect. By using "hands" as a stand-in for the idea of the soldiers themselves, the speakers emphasize the humanity and individuality of the dead and dying. "Hands" is a personal, specific image that gives the reader the sense that the speakers are very close by, almost close enough to touch. The specificity of the metonym subtly forms a bond between the speakers and the reader and reinforces the poem's core idea that everyone shares responsibility for the war.

Where Metonymy appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "guns"
- **Line 11:** "hands"

PERSONIFICATION

Personification occurs once in the poem, in line 4 where the "larks" are described as "bravely singing." Because bravery is a human quality not typically associated with birds, it's notable that the speakers choose to describe the larks in these terms. By making the reader think of the larks as "brave," the speakers imply that humans and nature are much more closely connected than the reader might have thought. That is, the birds aren't direct participants in the war, but they still reflect some of the positive qualities of the human soldiers. This subtle connection hints at the poem's theme of nature as lens for understanding the cycles of life and death that come with war.

Additionally, by suggesting that even the larks are "bravely" playing their role in the war effort, the speakers emphasize that absolutely everyone must take responsibility when it comes to war. This moment of personification foreshadows the speakers' demand, in line 10, that readers too must play a part in this ongoing conflict.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "The larks, still bravely singing,"

REPETITION

Repetition occurs twice in individual lines of the poem, as well as in the repeating refrain ("In Flanders fields") that occurs in lines 1, 9, and 15. In each case, the repetition creates a sense of expansiveness and importance. In line 2, the repetition within the phrase "row on row" creates an image of graves ("crosses") that extend for a long way, possibly farther than the eye can see. The speakers aren't describing just one or two rows; they're describing a countless number that signifies both how many people have died here and, more subtly, how endless the experience of death is.

Similarly, the repetition of the word "loved" in line 8 emphasizes that love is an important part of being alive and is, consequently, an important part of what the speakers ("the Dead") have lost. The repetition gives the impression that the love they shared with others was enormous, but tragically, it has been brought to an end by the even more powerful force of death.

Finally, the repetition of the words "In Flanders fields" brings home the idea that this location is inescapable. Flanders fields is a complex place where the abundant natural life of the first

stanza (like the "poppies" and "larks") coexists with the tragic death of the second stanza, and repeating its name so forcefully suggests that everything is ultimately tied to the cycles that play out there. It's notable that the word "poppies" also repeats in close proximity to the first and last instances of the refrain. Since poppies symbolize both death and the possibility that new life may spring from it, this added repetition reinforces the theme of life and death in eternal balance.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "In Flanders fields," "poppies"
- **Line 2:** "row on row"
- **Line 8:** "Loved and were loved"
- **Line 9:** "In Flanders fields"
- **Line 14:** "poppies"
- **Line 15:** "In Flanders fields"

VOCABULARY

Flanders (Line 1, Line 9, Line 15) - Flanders is a region in the northern part of Belgium. In World War I, many battles occurred in Flanders, and three battles in the municipality of Ypres were especially deadly. McCrae was moved to write "In Flanders fields" after witnessing the aftermath of these battles.

Larks (Line 4) - Larks are a kind of songbird. In some mythology and literature, larks symbolize the sunrise, which here connects to the mention of "dawn" in line 7 and suggests that the lark is a sign of hope and renewal even in the midst of battle.

Scarce (Line 5) - In this context, "scarce" is a synonym for "barely." Here it indicates that the "guns" of war are so loud, it's hard to hear the "larks" "singing" above.

Quarrel (Line 10) - A quarrel is a fight or argument. Here, the word seems to refer to the specific battle or war in which the speakers lost their lives, though it may also refer to a more abstract fight between those who want war and those who do not.

Break faith (Line 13) - In general, to "break faith" means to betray someone's trust or fail to keep a promise. In line 13, this phrase refers to the idea that the reader might betray the speakers by failing to listen to their story and carry on their fight.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"In Flanders Fields" is a rondeau, a poetic form that originated in medieval France with many variations and was later adapted to English by a number of poets. As is typical of some rondeau, it contains 15 lines and includes a repeated refrain (in this case, the words "In Flanders fields") in lines 1, 9, and 15.

The 15 lines are broken into a quintet, a quatrain, and a sestet, which are stanzas of five, four, and six lines, respectively:

- Quintet
- Quatrain
- Sestet

This poem also follows the conventions of a rondeau in that its refrain ("in Flanders fields") takes on a different meaning each time it appears: in line 1 it illustrates a beautiful natural scene; in line 9 it points to the death that took place in that location; and finally, in line 15 it brings these two opposing realities together.

METER

"In Flanders Fields" follows the conventions of iambic tetrameter in nearly every line. That is, most lines contain eight syllables (four iambs) in an alternating unstressed-stressed pattern. For instance, take line 10:

> Take up our quarrel with the foe:

Almost every line follows that same pattern. However, frequent use of caesurae often interrupts the poem's steady meter, creating breaks and pauses that suggest there is another, more complicated reality beneath the poem's faithful iambic tetrameter. This subtle tension is in keeping with the poem's broader thematic questions about the speakers' views on war and how best to respond to it.

The only lines that break with the pattern of iambic tetrameter are line 9 and line 15, which feature the recurring refrain ("In Flanders fields") typical of the rondeau form. Each of these matching lines has only two iambs:

> In Flanders fields.

This marked deviation from the rest of the poem's meter suggests that there is something strange about this place, something that interrupts the reliable natural cycles described elsewhere in the poem. Because "Flanders fields" is the site of a battle that killed countless soldiers ("the Dead" who speak throughout the poem), the interrupted meter hints that perhaps this senseless death should also be viewed as a deviation from the proper way of things.

RHYME SCHEME

"In Flanders Fields" follows the typical rhyme scheme of a 15-line English rondeau:

AABBA AABc AABBAc

Note that the lowercase c refers to the refrain ("In Flanders fields"), which repeats an exact line rather than rhyming with

the A pattern or the B pattern.

Like the consistent meter of iambic tetrameter, the regular rhyme scheme here creates a sense of stability which is then interrupted by the use of poetic devices including enjambment and caesura. This tension between the reliable cycle of the rhyme and the sometimes surprising effects of punctuation and word choice mirrors the poem's thematic tension between the horrors of war and the calm beauty of the natural world. Additionally, the refrain's obvious break with the rest of the rhyme (and meter) gives the speakers a way to emphasize the significance and perhaps even unnaturalness of Flanders fields itself, as a place of such much death and destruction.

SPEAKER

In the first stanza, the speaker of "In Flanders Fields" goes unspecified. The reader only knows that the speaker is in some way connected to the "crosses" that "mark our place" in a beautiful field full of poppies. At the beginning of the second stanza, however, it's revealed that the speaker is actually a group of speakers: "the Dead," who have recently died. The speakers go on to wistfully describe all that they have lost and reveal that they are now buried in Flanders fields. Though the speakers remain nameless and genderless, it is implied that they are soldiers who died in the World War I battles that took place in this location.

In the third stanza, the speakers' tone turns assertive, as they demand the reader do their part to carry on the fight that the speakers began. As the poem concludes, the speakers sound both hopeful and somewhat resigned, as they note that they will never be able to rest peacefully if the reader does not do as the speakers have asked. It is unclear, however, exactly what the speakers are asking for. They never define precisely what their "quarrel" is, which leaves it up to the reader to decide whether the speakers want the reader to join the war effort or try end it.

The tension between the speakers' romantic role as soldiers and their tragic one as regular people who have lost everything forms the core of the poem's question about whether war is glorious or horrific. Additionally, McCrae's choice to write the poem in the communal voice of multiple speakers emphasizes that responsibility is always shared in a war; it's impossible for individuals to separate themselves from such a powerful phenomenon.

SETTING

The poem is set in the natural landscape of Flanders, a region in the northern part of Belgium where several deadly battles took place in World War I. Specifically, it is set in a field where recently deceased soldiers are buried and poppies have already started to grow among their graves.

McCrae worked as a physician treating many of the soldiers who were wounded in these battles, and he also witnessed the burial of a close friend who was killed in one of them. Accordingly, the images recorded in the poem from the speakers' perspective are likely drawn from McCrae's firsthand impressions of this location.

Though the setting remains constant over the course of the poem, the speakers describe it in different ways, revealing how it is both a place of great natural splendor and the site of horrific violence. This contrast is seen by the way that the "larks" are "still bravely singing" in the midst of such bloody conflict, and the "poppies," which are hardy yet beautiful weeds, are able to grow among dead bodies and destruction, beautifying a landscape blanketed by death. In this way, the setting of "Flanders fields" encapsulates the cycles of life and death that the poem explores.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Although McCrae was also the author of other poems, as well as medical texts, "In Flanders Fields" is his only well-known literary work. However, the poem shares many characteristics with other poetry of the early years of World War I, when the war was still typically viewed as a romantic, patriotic endeavor. These related poems include the works of the young soldier Rupert Brooke (particularly "The Soldier") and other memorial poems such as Laurence Binyon's "For the Fallen."

During the later years of World War I, popular opinion shifted to view the war as a wasteful abomination rather than a glorious pursuit, and literary works changed to match. Though "In Flanders Fields" outwardly aligns with other romantic war poetry of 1915, it also hints at some of the concerns and perhaps even the anti-war sentiments of these later works. The works of poets Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, among others, describe the horrors of war in searing detail designed to show readers exactly how agonizing and wasteful the war was. In particular, Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est" represents a resounding rejection of the idea that killing and dying in the name of patriotism could ever be honorable. Other literary works of the time echoed similar ideas, including novels of the war's dark realities such as Ernest Hemingway's A Farewell to Arms.

By adhering to the romantic poetic conventions of the earlier phase of the war while beginning to touch on the themes of loss and destruction that became prominent in its later phase, "In Flanders Fields" rests at the intersection of two broad phases in World War I's literary landscape.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

McCrae wrote "In Flanders Fields" in 1915, against the backdrop of the early years of World War I, which had begun the previous year. At the time, the war was still viewed as a valiant and patriotic pursuit, though the full weight of its devastating consequences would soon become clear. Although McCrae was relatively unknown as a poet before publishing "In Flanders Fields" and died soon afterward, the poem nonetheless became one of the most famous written works about World War I. It was very popular among both soldiers and civilians, and in the United States, Great Britain, and Canada, it was used as a form of propaganda to encourage commitment to the war effort. It became especially well-known in Canada, McCrae's home country. The poem was translated into many languages and even criticized by some for the way it seems, in the third stanza, to glorify fighting at the expense of peace.

Perhaps the poem's greatest ongoing significance is its role in popularizing the poppy as a symbol of remembrance. Though the tendency of poppies to grow across battlefields had been noted in previous written works, McCrae's poem inspired an American professor named Moina Michael to wear a red silk poppy after the conclusion of the war as a way of remembering those who had died. Michael also wrote a poem in response to McCrae's and encouraged her friends to wear poppies as well. The movement spread internationally, and the poppy eventually became widely recognized as a symbol of remembrance for fallen soldiers. They are still commonly worn on Remembrance Day in many countries, including Great Britain, South Africa, and Canada.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Real Flanders Fields — Look at photographs of the site where McCrae composed "In Flanders Fields." (https://www.cwgc.org/find/find-cemeteries-and-memorials/15800/essex-farm-cemetery)
- "In Flanders Fields" Read by Leonard Cohen — Listen to a recording of musician and poet Leonard Cohen reading "In Flanders Fields" in 2015, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the poem's composition. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cKoJvHcMLfc)
- History of the Remembrance Poppy — Read more about the history of the remembrance poppies that "In Flanders Fields" inspired. (https://www.britishlegion.org.uk/remembrance/how-we-remember/the-story-of-the-poppy/)
- "In Flanders Fields" Set to Music — Listen to the poem set to music by composer Alexander Tilley, one of many musical settings of "In Flanders Fields." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4YmBZgL2P74)
- World War I Poetry — Read a collection of World War I poetry organized by the editors of The Poetry Foundation, arranged chronologically to show how interpretations of the war changed across time. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/70139/the-poetry-of-world-war-i)

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