The Dead (IV)

POEM TEXT

These hearts were woven of human joys and cares,
    Washed marvellously with sorrow, swift to mirth.
The years had given them kindness. Dawn was theirs,
    And sunset, and the colours of the earth.
These had seen movement, and heard music; known
    Slumber and waking; loved; gone proudly friended;
Felt the quick stir of wonder; sat alone;
    Touched flowers and furs and cheeks. All this is ended.

There are waters blown by changing winds to laughter
And lit by the rich skies, all day. And after,
    Frost, with a gesture, stays the waves that dance
And wandering loveliness. He leaves a white
    Unbroken glory, a gathered radiance,
A width, a shining peace, under the night.

SUMMARY

Once, the dead's hearts were full of happiness mixed with pain. They were wondrously flooded with sorrow, and they were quick to laugh. Getting older and wiser made them kinder. They possessed the sunrise, the sunset, and the colors of nature. The dead saw the world moving and heard the sound of music; they slept and awoke; they fell in love; they were proud of their friendships. They were moved by sudden moments of awe; they sat all alone; they touched flower petals, fur coats, and loved ones' cheeks. That's all over now.

Somewhere, the wind ripples brightly lit waters, making them seem to laugh, all day long. Then, the frost comes along; with a wave of his hand, he freezes the waves' movement and their freewheeling beauty. He leaves behind an endless white light—a growing glow—an empty space—a luminous peace beneath the night sky.

THEMES

DEATH, LOSS, AND CONSOLATION

In "The Dead (IV)," death washes away all the color and texture of life but also leaves comforting peace in its wake. The dead lose their capacity to feel and perceive, the speaker says, as they're cut off from the "stir of wonder" and the "colours of the earth." However, a glorious "radiance" flows in to fill the gap—a radiance that might suggest both the tranquility of the afterlife and the reverent love that people feel for their dead. Death, this poem suggests, means terrible loss, but it isn't without consolations: the memory of dead loved ones becomes especially significant and beautiful to the living, and the dead themselves rest in a "shining peace."

Life, the poem suggests, is a delicious, textured experience of mingled delight and pain. Being alive means getting to relish both the "joys and cares" of existence, from the pleasure of "proudly" embracing one's friendships to the beauty of "sunset" to the simple rhythms of 'slumber and waking." Even life's "sorrows," seen in the right light, are "marvellous[]," simply because they're *part* of life, part of the complex experience of living.

What's tragic about death, then, is that it brings all that rich thought and feeling to an end: the dead no longer experience a thing. "All this," for the dead, "is ended."

However, using a complex metaphor in which death is a frost freezing over the moving waters of life, the speaker suggests that death makes space for its own kind of beauty. In the "width" of emptiness that a person's death leaves behind, there's room for a "gathered radiance" to grow: a sense of "shining peace" that persists where all that life and action once was. In other words, the hole where a person used to be becomes a sacred ground for the people left behind; perhaps the dead, too, rest quietly in the eternal peace of the afterlife.

Death is thus both heartbreaking and beautiful. And, as such, it's a pretty good match for the sorrow and joy of life. Death might bring life's rich variety to an end, but it also bestows a consoling "peace" and "glory." The dead, the poem suggests, really do rest in peace, and the living can find comfort in the way that memories of lost loved ones take on a special "radiance."

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

These hearts were woven of human joys and cares,
Washed marvellously with sorrow, swift to mirth.
The years had given them kindness. Dawn was theirs,
And sunset, and the colours of the earth.

"The Dead (IV)" opens with a wistful tribute to those who have died and to everything they've had to leave behind. Death, these first lines suggest, means an end to all the everyday loveliness of life: joys so ordinary that one might not appreciate them until they're gone.

Part of the pleasure of being alive, a couple of initial metaphors suggest, is the experience of *feeling*—and not just feeling happy or satisfied or comfortable, either:

> These **hearts were woven of human joys and cares,**
> **Washed marvellously with sorrow**, swift to mirth.

The human "heart," these lines suggest, is all the richer for experiencing the "joys and cares" that are "woven" tightly together. And it's not *weighed down* by "sorrow," but "washed marvellously" with it, rinsed miraculously clean. Not only is "sorrow" marvelous, but it also travels pretty close to "mirth" (or laughter).

The joy of life, in other words, isn't just in the good times, but in the total package of human experience, joy and sorrow together.

There's a similar sense that just being alive is a blessing in these lines:

> [...] Dawn was theirs,
> And sunset, and the colours of the earth.

Living on this planet offers the chance to relish the everyday glory of sunrise, sunset, and the "colours" the sunlight illuminates.

What's more, life offers the chance to grow and to develop wisdom. "The years had given them kindness," the speaker remarks: the "dead" the poem addresses had learned something from their joys and sorrows and sensations.

These first lines, then, paint ordinary, unexceptional life as a lovely gift. In context, this idea feels awfully poignant. This poem is a tribute to "The Dead," to those who no longer get to enjoy all the richness these words describe.

What's more, it's part of Rupert Brooke's "1914," a five-poem sequence honoring the fallen soldiers of World War I. While the poem speaks of "the Dead" more generally, the speaker might have in mind a particular group of the dead, the young men whom the Great War ate up in such terrible numbers.

LINES 5-8

These had seen movement, and heard music; known
Slumber and waking; loved; gone proudly friended;
Felt the quick stir of wonder; sat alone;
Touched flowers and furs and cheeks. All this is ended.

The poem moves from reflecting on all the things the dead once *felt* to reflecting on all the things they once *did*. Listen to the parallelism in these lines:

> These had **seen** movement, and **heard** music; **known**
> Slumber and waking; **loved**; **gone** proudly friended;
> **Felt** the quick stir of wonder; **sat** alone;
> **Touched** flowers and furs and cheeks. [...]

Each of these clauses starts with an active verb, focusing these lines on the range of human experiences that the dead once enjoyed. Besides relishing the pleasures of the senses through what they saw, heard, and touched, the dead were connected to others, "proudly friended" and rejoicing in their loved ones. (Notice that the single word "loved" gets a whole clause to itself, as if no more needs to be said about that particular powerful experience.) The dead once "sat alone," too, whether lonely or just thoughtful.

Once again, there's a sense of the range and variety of human possibility here. The polysyndeton of "touched flowers **and** furs **and** cheeks" evokes sensory overwhelm: in life, these urgent *ands* suggest, there's always some new sensation to relish. (Perhaps the specific examples here evoke a rather luxurious early-20th-century world, too: those "furs" suggest fur coats.)

But listen to how line 8 concludes:

> Touched flowers and furs and cheeks. || All this is ended.

The caesura in the middle of this line brings this wealth of human experience to a firm ending. "All this," in death, "is ended."

So is the first section of the poem. This is a sonnet, a 14-line poem written in iambic pentameter (that is, lines of five iambs, metrical feet with a da-**DUM** rhythm). The meter has some variations that create interest and emphasis. Take line 8, which has a dangling eleventh syllable at its end (also note that "flowers" scans as a single syllable, "flow'rs"):

> Touched **flowers** | and **furs** | and **cheeks**. | All **this** | is **end**ed.

Brooke is actually mingling two sonnet traditions here, combining the alternating ABAB CDCD rhyme scheme of an English (or "Shakespearean") sonnet (in the first eight lines) with the structure of an Italian (or "Petrarchan") sonnet:

- Italian sonnets are traditionally divided into two parts: the octave, or first eight-line section, and the sestet, the concluding six-line section.
- Here at the end of the octave, the poem splits. Just as the dead's lives "are ended," so is the section of the poem describing the world of the living. The second part of the poem will explore death itself.

LINES 9-12

There are waters blown by changing winds to laughter
And lit by the rich skies, all day. And after,
Frost, with a gesture, stays the waves that dance
And wandering loveliness.

The poem's second part, its six-line sestet, begins with what might at first seem like an abrupt change of scene. The speaker describes a landscape that could be anywhere:

> There are waters blown by changing winds to laughter
> And lit by the rich skies, all day. [...]

The personification implied in "waters blown by changing winds to laughter" suggests that these are the metaphorical waters of life itself, full of movement and "mirth," just like the lives the speaker described in the octave. Perhaps the "changing winds" that ripple the waters even suggest breath.

Now, another personified figure appears:

> [...] And after,
> Frost, with a gesture, stays the waves that dance
> And wandering loveliness. [...]

That "frost," which freezes the "wandering loveliness" of life into stillness needs only a single slight "gesture" to do so; its power is so great that a wave of its hand brings the whole "dance" to an end. Readers don't need to make too great an imaginative leap to see that this frost personifies death itself.

Here, then, the speaker is imagining all of life and all of death in big, universal images: visions of the seasons that could come from anywhere there's water and winter. Linking human lives and deaths to the rhythms of nature, the poem begins to suggest that the tragedy and loss of death—all the feeling and sensation that's "ended" when life is over—is also just part of an endless natural cycle, beautiful in its own way as the turn of the year.

LINES 12-14

He leaves a white
Unbroken glory, a gathered radiance,
A width, a shining peace, under the night.

In a vision of a metaphorical frost freezing life's dancing waters into stillness, the speaker observed that death is as powerful and inevitable as winter. As the poem concludes, it will suggest that, like winter, death has its own kind of strange beauty. This is very different from the rich texture of life, but lovely nonetheless.

Listen to the speaker's imagery in these closing lines:

> [...] He leaves a white
> Unbroken glory, a gathered radiance,
> A width, a shining peace, under the night.

The strongest impression the speaker gives here is of *light*—so much light that the poem has to describe it three different times. That "white / Unbroken glory" suggests the gleam of a fresh snowfall before a single creature has walked over it. The "gathered radiance," similarly, suggests an accumulation, a "gather[ing]" of some *new* light, not just a gap where movement and life used to be. All this light is gentle, too: it brings with it a "shining peace." It's as quiet and restful as it is glorious and radiant.

Note, too, that all this shining goes on "under the night," after the "rich skies" of life's long "day." The metaphorical sun has gone down over the lives of the dead, but that doesn't mean they're left in the dark; something flows in to fill the empty "width" they leave behind.

This personified Death, then, isn't just a robber. He brings gifts to replace those he took away. That "shining peace" might suggest the "peace" in which the living traditionally hope the dead will rest. But it might also hint that there's consolation for those left behind: that the "width" the dead leave behind them fills up with a quiet light. The memory of the dead, the poem's closing lines suggest, itself "shin[es]" with sacred significance.

POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

The metaphors in the poem's first lines present feelings as tangible, physical things. In doing so, they evoke the joy of having a living body.

The dead, the speaker remarks in the first line, once enjoyed the rich texture of all kinds of emotions. Their "hearts were woven of human joys and cares." The image of weaving here immediately suggests that this poem won't just be dealing with the *pleasures* that the dead have to leave behind, but with the whole human experience. "Joys and cares" are knitted together here: you can't have one without the other. In fact, this metaphor suggests, the complex texture of interwoven happiness and sadness is part of what's great about being alive.

There's a similar sense of mingled pleasure and pain in the next line, where the speaker says that the dead's hearts were "washed marvellously with sorrow." Sadness, here, is both cleansing and miraculous. This "wash" of sorrow vividly evokes what it feels like to experience a rush of sadness, like a liquid washing across one's heart. It also suggests that sorrow can feel like being washed clean, refreshed. How "marvellous[]," the speaker suggests: how strange and wonderful it is to experience sadness!

Emotions, these metaphors suggest, aren't just intellectual

experiences, but bodily ones. Part of the delight of being alive is getting to *feel*.

(Besides these metaphors, the poem also uses plenty of personification. Read more about that in the separate "Personification" entry.)

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "These hearts were woven of human joys and cares, / Washed marvellously with sorrow"

PERSONIFICATION

The personification in the poem's closing sestet presents death as a force as natural (and beautiful) as the frost.

The speaker begins the second section of the poem with an image of human life as ever-moving waters, stirred to "laughter" and "dance[s]" by "changing winds." Eventually, though, a personified "Frost" comes along and stops all that movement short. At first, he might seem like a grim figure; the "laughter" stops as soon as he turns up. But he leaves behind a gift, too: a "white / Unbroken glory" that offers a "shining peace" to all who meet it.

Death, here, is both a person with a plan and a force of nature. Metaphorically connecting death to frost, the speaker suggests that death is just part of the circle of life (as winter is part of the circle of the seasons), and a lovely one at that. The clean, "unbroken" whiteness of a frosty landscape has its own beauty. Similarly, the stillness of death brings with it both "peace" for the dead and a "gathered radiance" for the people left behind, a sense that the empty "width" where their loved ones were becomes a shining, sacred space.

If frosty death is a conscious force, then, he's a mysterious and powerful one, but also wise and not unkindly.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "waters blown by changing winds to laughter"
- **Lines 11-13:** "Frost, with a gesture, stays the waves that dance / And wandering loveliness. He leaves a white / Unbroken glory"

IMAGERY

A passage of eerie, graceful imagery at the end of the poem evokes the mysterious beauties of death.

When a personified death comes along like a frost and freezes the moving waters of life, he might seem like an ominous and cruel figure, ending all the world's "laughter" for good. However, he's not just a destroyer. He leaves something new behind in his wake:

> [...] He leaves **a white**
> **Unbroken glory**, a **gathered radiance**,
> A width, a **shining peace**, under the night.

This "white / Unbroken glory" suggests the stark, clean blankness of a landscape covered in snow, so bright that it hurts one's eyes. In fact, this "glory" is so luminous that the speaker has to use a whole range of words describing light to capture it:

- It's also a "gathered radiance," an image that suggests a light surging up out of darkness, "gather[ing]" itself up bit by bit.
- And it's a "shining peace," a turn of phrase that unites sight and sound: this is a quiet stillness that seems to glow.

These shapeshifting images of light suggest that death isn't at all a grim and empty darkness, as one might be tempted to imagine. In fact, the "width" death leaves behind shines "under the night," *illuminating* the darkness. Death, this imagery suggests, isn't just an absence and a loss. The space where a beloved dead person used to be fills up with a different kind of luminous presence.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 12-14:** "He leaves a white / Unbroken glory, a gathered radiance, / A width, a shining peace, under the night."

PARALLELISM

The poem's intense parallelism helps to evoke both the exciting, overwhelming variety of life and the almost indescribable beauty of death.

In the poem's octave (its opening eight-line section), the speaker wistfully describes the texture of an ordinary human life—all the everyday experiences that seem miraculous and special when that life is over. Fittingly, the parallelism here often suggests action and liveliness. Listen to all the strong verbs in a row here:

> These had **seen** movement, and **heard** music; **known**
> Slumber and waking; **loved**; **gone** proudly friended;
> **Felt** the quick stir of wonder; **sat** alone;
> **Touched** flowers and furs and cheeks. All this is ended.

All this active language suggests just how much one can *do* in a life: how much one can see, hear, and touch, how many kinds of relationships one can enjoy. Similarly, the anaphora (and polysyndeton) of "Dawn was theirs, / **And** sunset, **and** the colours of the earth" suggests that to be alive is to have the run of all the earth's everyday beauties.

Alas, these pleasures don't last forever; death puts an end to all the ordinary joys of life (and perhaps makes the living realize what a blessing those joys really are!). But death also brings with it a kind of strange, luminous beauty. Listen to the poem's anaphora as the speaker grasps for the right words to describe that beauty:

> [...] He leaves **a** white
> Unbroken glory, **a** gathered radiance,
> A width, **a** shining peace, under the night.

The repeated phrasing here makes it sound as if the speaker is struggling to describe the nature of the "gathered radiance" that death leaves in its wake. Perhaps, this phrasing suggests, the strange beauty of death is difficult to see head-on, almost too bright to look at.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "woven"
- **Line 2:** "Washed"
- **Line 4:** "And," "and"
- **Line 5:** "seen movement," "heard music"
- **Lines 5-6:** "known / Slumber"
- **Line 6:** "loved," "gone"
- **Line 7:** "Felt," "sat"
- **Line 8:** "Touched"
- **Lines 12-14:** "a white / Unbroken glory, a gathered radiance, / A width, a shining peace,"

VOCABULARY

Woven of human joys and cares (Line 1) - That is, made up of a mixture of happiness and hardship.

Mirth (Line 2) - Laughter, amusement.

Gone proudly friended (Line 6) - In other words, felt proud to have good friends.

Stays (Line 11) - Stops, keeps from moving.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Dead (IV)" is a sonnet, but not an altogether traditional one. Brooke uses elements of both Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnets here:

- Like a Petrarchan sonnet, the poem has 14 lines divided into two sections: the octave (or eight-line introductory section) and the sestet (the six-line closing section).
- Unusually, though, the octave doesn't use a Petrarchan ABBA ABBA rhyme scheme, but a Shakespearean ABAB CDCD pattern.
- The sestet also plays around with rhyme. While most Petrarchan sonnets choose either a CDCDCD or CDECDE scheme for this section, here the speaker uses a EEFGFG pattern.

This experimentation with traditional styles makes the poem feel at once familiar and surprising—a combination that suits the speaker's reflections on everyday life, which looks a lot more poignant and beautiful from the perspective of the dead.

The octave/sestet division also draws a clear line between the speaker's reflection on life's beauties and the image of life as water frozen by the "frost" of death—a border separating the everyday world from the "gathered radiance" that comes when life is over.

METER

Like most sonnets, "The Dead (IV)" is written in iambic pentameter. That means that each of its lines uses five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. Here's how that sounds in line 1:

> These **hearts** | were **woven** | of **hu**- | man **joys** | and **cares**,

(Note that "woven" here is pronounced with one syllable: *wov'n*.)

Brooke doesn't stick steadily to that rhythm throughout, however. From time to time, he varies the poem's feet for emphasis and music. For instance, listen to the different rhythms in line 5:

> These had | seen **move**- | **ment**, and | **heard mu**- | sic; **known**

The first and third feet here are each the opposite of an iamb: a trochee, with a DUM-da rhythm. And the two strong stresses in "**heard mu**sic" form a spondee (DUM-DUM).

Variations like these help this wistful speaker's voice to sound natural and reflective: the meter's shape changes to follow the speaker's thoughts.

RHYME SCHEME

This sonnet's unusual rhyme scheme runs like this:

ABABCDCD EEFGFG

Brooke uses his own variation on two different sonnet traditions here. The poem's rhymes divide it into an eight-line octave and a six-line sestet, just like a Petrarchan sonnet. But the octave uses the alternating ABAB CDCD rhymes of a Shakespearean sonnet, and the EEFGFG sestet uses a pattern of Brooke's own invention.

In the first eight lines of the poem, readers might imagine that they're reading a standard Shakespearean sonnet, whose rhymes run ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. The introduction of the *laughter / after* couplet in lines 9-10 thus comes as a little shock, marking a sharp division between the first eight lines (in which the speaker describes the poignant beauty of everyday life) and the closing six (in which the speaker depicts death and the strange "radiance" it leaves in its wake).

SPEAKER

There's no clear speaker in "The Dead (IV)." Instead, the poem presents a wide view of life and death. That broadness creates a timeless, universal tone, suggesting that what the poem has to say about the beauty of life and the peace of death is the same for everyone, everywhere.

However, the poem might offer a glimpse of Brooke's own well-to-do Oxbridge life in line 8, when the speaker remarks that the dead once "touched flowers and furs and cheeks." Those "flowers and furs" might, on the one hand, just suggest the beauty of nature, the joy of plucking a rose or petting a dog. But "furs," plural, tends to suggest the kind one wears, not the kind that's still on an animal. These lines might thus suggest middle-class turn-of-the-century pleasures: fur coats and cut flowers.

SETTING

Just as there's no obvious speaker in "The Dead (IV)," there's no grounded setting; the scenes of life and death the speaker describes could take place in any place or time. However, the context in which this poem was published hints that the speaker is thinking of one group of the "dead" in particular. This is the fourth poem of Brooke's "1914," a sequence celebrating and lamenting the fallen soldiers of World War I. "The Dead (IV)" and its companions became famous and popular among post-war mourners for their respectful contemplation of what the war dead sacrificed and how they might be honored.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Rupert Brooke (1887-1915) was one of the most famous and popular of the British soldier poets of World War I. He joined the English Navy in 1914, the first year of the war, and he died the following year—not in battle, but from an infection following a mosquito bite. His poetic influences include W.B. Yeats, Charles Baudelaire, John Keats, and Oscar Wilde.

Brooke's poetry was immensely successful from its first publication, capturing the imagination of a nation at war. "The Dead (IV)" is part of a sequence titled "1914," which also includes a companion sonnet, "The Dead (III)," and Brooke's most famous poem, "The Soldier." Brooke's poetry was seen as embodying the very spirit of the loyal soldier, willing to lay down his life for the good of his country. In fact, Winston Churchill, England's prime minister during World War II, described Brooke as "all that one could wish England's noblest sons to be."

Brooke's wartime poetry tends to reflect a romantic notion of war and self-sacrifice. This poem, for instance, presents a vision of a "shining peace" in which the honored dead can rest. Those of Brooke's contemporaries who lived longer and saw more of the war took a dimmer view: for instance, compare this poem's luminous, idealized imagery to the nightmare vision (and disgusted cynicism) of Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This poem appeared in a sequence commemorating the dead of World War I—a war known, at the time it was fought, as "the war to end all wars" (a phrase that proved tragically inaccurate when World War II broke out a generation later).

WWI began when assassin Gavrilo Princip shot Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire (which ruled a large section of Central and Eastern Europe at the time). Austria-Hungary accused their enemy Serbia of masterminding this assassination; Germany supported Austria-Hungary; Russia supported Serbia. Soon, chains of pre-existing alliances had pulled nearly all of Europe (and countries beyond) into bloody trench warfare, a snowballing catastrophe that would claim about 16 million lives.

WWI was horrendously destructive. Life on the battlefields of Europe was terrifying and deadly, and unsanitary conditions at the front caused frequent disease. But Brooke, who died early in the conflict and off the battlefield, saw virtually none of this horror. This poem and its companions reflect a vision of war and death as glorious and ennobling—a vision that would make Brooke a popular patriotic poet, his work often quoted at government memorial services or engraved on monuments.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to the poem read aloud by the great Shakespearean actor Sir John Gielgud. (https://youtu.be/kEmjJO-jL2M)
- A Celebration of Brooke — Watch a short documentary on Brooke's life and work. (https://youtu.be/lNLagc7Khlg)
- Brooke's Legacy — Visit the website of the Rupert Brooke Society to learn about his lasting influence. (https://www.rupertbrooke.com/)
- A Manuscript of the Poem — See a draft of this poem in

Brooke's own handwriting. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/rupert-brooke)

- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Brooke's life and work at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/rupert-brooke)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER RUPERT BROOKE POEMS

- The Dead (III)
- The Soldier

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Nelson, Kristin. "*The Dead (IV)*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 17 May 2022. Web. 23 May 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Nelson, Kristin. "*The Dead (IV)*." LitCharts LLC, May 17, 2022. Retrieved May 23, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/rupert-brooke/the-dead-iv.