Base Details

POEM TEXT

If I were fierce, and bald, and short of breath,
I'd live with scarlet Majors at the Base,
And speed glum heroes up the line to death.
You'd see me with my puffy petulant face,
Guzzling and gulping in the best hotel,
Reading the Roll of Honour. "Poor young chap,"
I'd say—"I used to know his father well;
Yes, we've lost heavily in this last scrap."
And when the war is done and youth stone dead,
I'd toddle safely home and die—in bed.

SUMMARY

If I were short-tempered, balding, and unfit, I'd live with the red-faced army majors at the base. From there, I would send unhappy soldiers to their deaths on the front lines.

You'd find me looking bloated and childish, indulging in the finest food and drink at the luxurious hotel where I'd live. I'd read through the names of those who had recently died, and say: "Poor boy! I knew his father pretty well. This recent spat certainly has caused some serious losses."

And after the war ended, and thousands of young men were killed, I would make my way back home and die a comfortable death in my own bed.

THEMES

WAR AND POWER

"Base Details" is a bitingly satirical war poem that takes aim at the World War I military establishment. The poem's speaker imagines what his life would be like if he were one of the comfortable top officers of the British Army. As an officer, he'd live an easy, luxurious life far away from the horrors of the front line—and casually make military decisions that would send countless young men to terrible deaths. Sassoon's poem paints the British military establishment as entitled, uncaring, and corrupt, and suggests that World War I in general was a game the old, rich, and powerful played with the lives of the young.

Picturing life as a high-status officer, the speaker suggests that higher-ups in the military have little contact with the harsh reality of young soldiers' lives. As a well-padded old officer, "bald and short of breath," the speaker imagines he'd spend his time among men just like himself, all eating and drinking to their heart's content in the "best hotel" as though on holiday.

All this comfort, the speaker implies, forms a sharp contrast with the hunger, fear, misery, and poignant youth of the soldiers on the front line. These old officers don't seem to have any real sense of the suffering their decisions create: they read through the names of the dead (the "Roll of Honour") making flippant remarks and describing the latest battle as a mere "scrap." Their callous attitude towards the waste of young lives suggests just how distant they are from the horrors of battle.

Despite their removal from war's grim realities, the officers' decision-making has a great impact on what happens. The officers act like uncaring gods, "speed[ing]" soldiers into battle. Those in positions of power don't *feel* the weight of their decisions precisely because they are so far away. The officers thus have all the control but suffer none of the consequences.

The soldiers, on the other hand, have little control over the course of the war but must experience its tragedy first-hand. To the former group, the war is abstract and far away; to the latter, it is an awful daily reality.

And not only do these top officers fail to understand their part in the soldiers' sufferings, they don't even feel a flicker of guilt. Long after the war is over, the speaker imagines, these officers will "toddle safely home and die—in bed." In other words, they'll die comfortably in their own cozy beds, never confronting the battlefield horrors they commanded.

The poem thus illustrates two parallel wartime experiences: one for the powerful, and one for the powerless. Through its portrait of selfish, greedy, indifferent, and shameless old majors, the poem depicts war as an absurd and tragic game, played at the whim of the elderly elite—and paid for with the blood of the helpless younger generation.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-10

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

If I were fierce, and bald, and short of breath,
I'd live with scarlet Majors at the Base,
And speed glum heroes up the line to death.

"Base Details" launches immediately into its scathing, sarcastic criticism of the "scarlet Majors" of World War I—the military

elite in charge of the British Army. The poem hinges on the opening word, "If." The speaker will be describing all the things he *would* do *if* he was a major; but, of course, he's not part of that elite group. The poem draws on Sassoon's own wartime experiences with high-ranking officials: he served as an ordinary soldier and had all too clear a sense of the difference between the lives of such soldiers and the lives of the men who commanded them.

The speaker's ironic tone is clear right from the outset in the poem's title. "Base" might be read both as a noun, as in "army base," and as an adjective, meaning lowly or depraved. And those "Details" could mean groups of soldiers (such as those under a major's command) *and* the details of elite military life presented by the poem. These opening puns prepare the reader for a poem full of dark, sardonic humor.

The first line is pure caricature, describing the majors as "fierce, and bald, and short of breath": short-tempered, aging, and unfit. The three caesurae in the first line give it a bumbling pace that fits with the image of these slow-moving, red-faced old men.

That image already forms a stark contrast with the image of the "glum heroes" that these majors hurry "up the line to death": that is, the young, frightened soldiers actually fighting the war on the front lines. The poem doesn't say much directly about the front-line experience, but the horrors of World War I trench combat lurk in the background, creating a juxtaposition between two very different wartime experiences.

It would be a pleasant life, thinks the speaker, to live with these "scarlet Majors" at the Base, miles away from the artillery and machine-gun fire. Here, "scarlet" has multiple possible readings. These generals live a pretty indulgent lifestyle, and it shows on their faces, which are puffy and red—unlike the gaunt, pale faces of those on the front line. But "scarlet" could also relate to the waste of young life during World War I: the spilled blood of countless soldiers and civilians. Perhaps the speaker's word choice might even evoke an unconscious blush, painting the majors with a subtle hue of shame.

Though the majors are geographically far removed from the action, their decisions have a huge impact: directing the war from afar as if they were playing a game, they "speed" all those young soldiers to their terrible fates in the trenches. They have all of the power—but suffer none of the consequences. They don't *feel* the weight of their decisions precisely because they live such remote, luxurious lives.

And the way the soldiers are described here makes the distance between soldiers and majors even clearer. "Glum" sounds like more than a little bit of an understatement: the soldiers aren't "glum"—which means sad or dejected—as much as terrified for their lives. And when they're described as "heroes," the word feels cheap, as though it's a word that the majors throw about insincerely to put a noble spin on the deaths of countless young men.

The end-stop at the end of line 3 creates a little silence to match with the mention of "death," and draws attention to the rhyme between that word and line 1's "breath." This supports the poem's central juxtaposition, too: while the majors keep on breathing, the "glum heroes" are sent out to die.

LINES 4-6

You'd see me with my puffy petulant face,
Guzzling and gulping in the best hotel,
Reading the Roll of Honour.

From line 4 onwards, the poem draws out the disconnect between the "scarlet Majors" at the base and the consequences of their decisions.

If he were a major, the speaker goes on, he would have a "puffy petulant face": in other words, a red, bloated, childishly irritable appearance is practically part of the job requirements! The plosive alliterative /p/ in "puffy, petulant" evokes these red-faced old men's loud, ugly bluster.

The puffiness of the majors' faces comes from their indulgent lifestyles: they live at the "best hotel," and indulge in fine food and drink to their hearts' content. But the image could also subtly gesture towards another kind of puffiness: the gaseous swelling of corpses on a battlefield. The poem's *lack* of explicit mention of actual warfare gives images like this one a haunting, subconscious quality that plays on the reader's knowledge of the horrors of World War I.

Back to the hotel, though, where the majors spend their days "guzzling and gulping." Their lived reality could hardly be more different from life on the front lines; it's almost as if they are on a luxury holiday, with a little bit of admin work to do here and there. The alliteration, consonance, and assonance of "guzzling and gulping" is almost onomatopoeic, suggesting that the majors scarf down their delicacies as greedily and thoughtlessly as pigs.

And the thought of the war dead doesn't seem to diminish their appetites one bit: they guzzle and gulp even as they read the "Roll of Honour," a document that lists the names of the war dead. Especially during World War I, this would have made pretty grim reading: so many soldiers died every day that it became almost impossible to maintain accurate records. But to these majors, this list is just some light suppertime reading.

The capitalization of "Roll of Honour" thus takes on an ironic quality, rather like the description of the young soldiers as "heroes" in line 3. It's not that these soldiers *aren't* heroic or honorable, but that the behavior of the majors completely undermines any sense of honor, duty, or heroism.

LINES 6-8

"Poor young chap,"
I'd say—"I used to know his father well;
Yes, we've lost heavily in this last scrap."

Having painted a grotesque picture of the majors eating like pigs in a fine hotel while reading the lists of the far-away war dead, the speaker imagines what he'd say if he were one of those majors. By now, readers are pretty sure that the answer will be: nothing pleasant.

And indeed, the majors are appallingly casual about the deaths, making cursory remarks that carry little sense of tragedy or occasion: they sound more like they're reading the sports page than looking at a horrific tally of thousands of dead young men. Even when they have a personal connection with one of the dead ("I used to know his father well"), the loss barely seems to register. All those "Poor young chap[s]"—a phrase which again juxtaposes the youthful dead and the powerful old majors—seem more like game tokens than real people to these men.

The majors' euphemisms make their utter disconnect from the soldiers they command even clearer. When the speaker imagines referring to the latest losses as the result of a mere "scrap"—that is, a mere tussle, a small spontaneous fight—the word choice absurdly diminishes the tragedy of war. A "scrap," here, probably refers to a battle that caused thousands of deaths.

LINES 9-10

> *And when the war is done and youth stone dead,*
> *I'd toddle safely home and die—in bed.*

The last two lines of the poem look to the post-war future. Still imagining what life would be like as a major, the speaker thinks about what he'd do after "the war is done." While so many young men lie dead, strewn across the battlefields of Europe, the majors will "toddle safely home and die—in bed." In other words, the majors' own deaths, far in the future, will be perfectly comfortable—and apparently guiltless.

The juxtaposition between the majors and the young soldiers here is stark and tragic. Because of their geographical—and emotional—distance from the fighting, the majors don't seem to feel any regret or distress about their wartime roles. Instead, their post-war life continues the comfort of their wartime life. They will get to "toddle" home, peaceful and safe as overgrown children. But many soldiers will never return. The loss of life is so great that not just young soldiers, but "youth" itself seems "stone dead."

These closing lines drive home the speaker's outrage and grief over the whole war. These selfish and greedy old majors, the poem suggests, completely fail to understand what they're doing: holed up in their comfortable hotels, they casually destroy millions of lives. The soldiers and those in charge live two completely different existences in parallel.

The formal shift in the last couple of lines subtly and sadly underlines the speaker's point. Up until now, the poem has used two quatrains, rhymed ABAB. In the last two lines, the poem shifts to a couplet, rhymed CC. That movement gestures toward the English sonnet form, which uses *three* quatrains and a concluding couplet. "Base Details" *almost* follows that format—but it's missing a quatrain, which makes it feel incomplete, unfinished, and cut off.

And that mirrors exactly what's going on in this poem. The Majors don't have a complete understanding of the war—and all those dead young soldiers have been cut off in their prime.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration portrays the "scarlet Majors"—the generals in charge of the army—as gluttonous, greedy, and ugly.

The speaker characterizes these majors as middle-aged, childish, and unfit. They are unfit because they don't do any actual fighting, and spend their days filling their bellies with fine food and drink! The poem uses powerful alliterative sounds to mimic (and mock) the physical state of the majors:

> If I were fierce, and bald, and short of breath,
> [...]
> You'd see me with my puffy petulant face,

This round, plosive /b/ and /p/ alliteration is deliberately unsubtle. These middle-aged majors are hardly fine physical specimens, and so the sound here is purposely ugly and blunt.

The poem also alliteratively captures these men's lavish self-indulgence when the speaker imagines:

> Guzzling and gulping in the best hotel,

In other words, the majors eat and drink to their hearts' (or stomachs') content—while front-line soldiers go hungry and fight for their lives. Here, the /g/ alliteration (and /u/ and /l/ assonance and consonance) are onomatopoeic, sounding just like a bunch of sloppy old men taking messy, greedy bites of food. All that culinary pleasure is the last thing most people would associate with that war—showing how out of touch the majors are with the young men over whom they wield so much power.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "bald," "breath"
- **Line 4:** "puffy petulant"
- **Line 5:** "Guzzling," "gulping"
- **Line 6:** "Reading," "Roll"

ALLUSION

The poem's allusions to military formalities, like ranks and the

"Roll of Honour," situate this poem in the World War I years. But they also give the reader a picture of the systems of class and status that contributed to the war's tragedy.

The military ranking system here creates two parallel war experiences that could not be more different. The "scarlet Majors"—red-faced old generals—live the high life, practically on holiday, with only a few key decisions to make here and there. But those decisions have a great impact on thousands of young men, often sending them to their death. The high-ranking officials have all the power and suffer none of the consequences.

And though there is a "Roll of Honour" to record the names of those who die, the majors pay it only the most perfunctory attention. It hardly enshrines the dead in "Honour": instead, it seems more like a futile gesture, one that can't begin to capture the monumental loss of life on the battlefields. (In fact, as World War I went on, the Roll of Honour became harder and harder to maintain: too many young men were dying every day for the record-keepers to keep up.) Again, this allusion portrays the majors as callously distant from the soldiers' reality—as though they are merely playing at war.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "scarlet Majors"
- **Line 6:** "Roll of Honour"

ASSONANCE

The poem uses assonance to generate music, drama, and emphasis. In the first example—"Majors" and "Base"—it also ties two words conceptually together. That is, the Majors live at the base, *not* on the front-line.

The most prominent example of assonance occurs in line 5 (at the same time as alliteration and consonance). The speaker imagines life as a major (a high-ranking military official), spending his days "Guzzling and gulping in the best hotel[.]" As with the alliteration in the poem, this assonance portrays the "scarlet Majors" as gluttonous creatures. They preside over the war like distant gods, sending young men to their death while indulging their own voracious appetites for fine food and drink. The assonance has a gulping, almost onomatopoeic quality that shows the majors to be greedy and self-centered. The two smooth /eh/ sounds in "best hotel" make their base sound comfy and lavish.

Finally, "stone dead" in line 9 is picked up by "home" in line 10, further developing the juxtaposition between two very different types of death: the young men who perish on the battlefield, and the majors who die in comfort back at home after the war.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Majors," "Base"
- **Line 4:** "see me"
- **Line 5:** "Guzzling," "gulping," "best," "hotel"
- **Line 8:** "last," "scrap"
- **Line 9:** "stone"
- **Line 10:** "home"

CAESURA

The poem's frequent caesurae help to paint vivid pictures of the scenes the speaker describes, and add emotional punch to important moments.

For instance, take a look at the caesurae in the first line, in which the speaker imagines being a blustery old major:

> If I were fierce, || and bald, || and short of breath,

Those pauses give these words a bumbling, "short of breath" rhythm that fits with the speaker's cartoonish depiction of the "scarlet Majors" (those in charge of the army). These men are middle-aged and unfit, more concerned with eating nice food and drinking booze than keeping themselves in fine fettle. The caesurae evoke their labored breathing as they make their way to their next meal.

The solid mid-line period after "Roll of Honour" in line 6, meanwhile, marks a small, almost ceremonial silence that gestures towards the tragedy of war. The "Roll of Honour" is a list of all the war dead, and the brief pause here mimics death's ultimate silence. It also makes that "Honour" ring hollow: the majors *reading* the "Roll of Honour" barely pause for a second over all those thousands of names.

Another caesura of note occurs in the last line:

> I'd toddle safely home and die— || in bed.

This dash works almost like a punchline, setting up the poem's final dark joke. While young soldiers lie strewn across the fields of Europe, the majors make it home to England and die peaceful deaths in their own beds. The contrast could hardly be more stark.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "fierce, and bald, and"
- **Line 6:** "Honour. "Poor"
- **Line 7:** "say—"I"
- **Line 8:** " Yes, we've"
- **Line 10:** "die—in"

END-STOPPED LINE

The whole poem is end-stopped, creating a steady, plodding rhythm throughout. There are three especially striking end-

stops, however: line 3, line 8, and line 10.

When line 3 comes to a halt, "death" rings out in the brief silence. The pause this end-stop creates has an almost ceremonial feel to it, one which makes the majors seems even more callous and cold when, in the following lines, they gluttonously indulge themselves in the finest food and wine.

Two of the other end-stops also mark death, but in different ways. The end-stop after "scrap" highlights the majors' euphemistic, flippant talk about the war dead. "Scrap" here probably means a battle in which thousands of men have lost their lives. The majors are constantly getting the tone wrong, unable to fully comprehend the consequences of their decisions. The end-stop after "scrap" gives the reader that extra little beat to feel the speaker's outrage at this kind of behavior.

The last end-stop, also the end of the poem, stings with biting satire. While thousands of young men lie dead in fields across Europe, the majors get to die peacefully at home—guilt-free and comfortable. The end-stop makes this dark moment land like a punchline, making sure that the poem ends on a strong note of black humor that highlights the majors' hypocrisy.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "breath,"
- **Line 2:** "Base,"
- **Line 3:** "death."
- **Line 4:** "face,"
- **Line 5:** "hotel,"
- **Line 6:** "chap,""
- **Line 7:** "well;"
- **Line 8:** "scrap.""
- **Line 9:** "dead,"
- **Line 10:** "bed."

JUXTAPOSITION

Juxtaposition runs throughout the poem, creating a contrast between two completely different—but parallel—wartime experiences. That juxtaposition first appears right in the poem's opening word, "If." The speaker imagines what life *would* be like *if* he were a "scarlet Major" (a military elite)—but that "if" shows that he clearly isn't one of these high-ranking officials. Most likely, then, the speaker is a regular soldier, suffering all the horrors of the trenches.

The poem doesn't need to talk explicitly about the horrors of the First World War; these lurk in the background, haunting every line. The juxtaposition applies to pretty much every aspect of life (and death):

- The soldiers are young and terrified; the majors are middle-aged, balding, and unfit.
- The soldiers don't have much to eat and drink, and when they do, it's not good. The majors have the best food and wine.
- The soldiers don't have comfortable beds, and hardly sleep, whereas the majors have cosy hotel rooms.
- The soldiers have no real power, while the majors have it all and suffer none of the consequences of their decisions.
- At the end of the war, young men lie dead all over Europe, far from the place they call home. The majors head home, and die peacefully in their own beds.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6
- Lines 9-10

UNDERSTATEMENT

The majors' geographical distance from the war front—and thus their distance from the consequences of their decision-making—also manifests in the way that they speak. They send *thousands* of men to their deaths, but talk about it in an understated manner that seems incongruous with the sheer tragedy of the situation.

This understatement appears in lines 6 to 8, in which the speaker imagines the kind of thing he would say if he was a major (based on what he's heard previously):

> [...] "Poor young chap,"
> I'd say—"I used to know his father well;
> Yes, we've lost heavily in this last scrap."

The tone here is pretty flippant. Though "poor young chap" isn't exactly an understatement, it's so casual that it sounds jarringly inappropriate. The use of casual, gossipy details ("I used to know his father well") doesn't fit the occasion either. But it's in the description of battle as a "scrap" that the majors are at their most euphemistic. This "scrap" was likely a conflict that claimed thousands of young lives—but the majors make it sound like two kids fighting in a playground. These underplayed lines make the majors come across as completely out of touch.

Where Understatement appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-8:** ""Poor young chap," / I'd say—"I used to know his father well; / Yes, we've lost heavily in this last scrap.""

VOCABULARY

Scarlet (Line 2) - Red-faced.

Majors (Line 2) - Major Generals: high-ranking military officials.

Base (Line 2) - Base camp (in this case a hotel), where major military decisions are made.

Speed (Line 3) - Send off.

Glum (Line 3) - Gloomy. This casual word is a deliberate understatement that shows how completely out of touch the majors are with the young soldiers' sufferings.

The Line (Line 3) - The dangerous leading edge of a battlefield; sometimes also known as the front line.

Petulant (Line 4) - Childish and bad-tempered.

Guzzling (Line 5) - Eating and drinking greedily.

Roll of Honour (Line 6) - An official document recording the names of the war dead.

Chap (Line 6) - Fellow, guy.

Scrap (Line 8) - A small fight. This is another deliberate understatement that suggests the majors have no idea how terrible the front lines really are.

Toddle (Line 10) - Stroll casually and/or childishly.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Though it's presented as one long 10-line stanza, "Base Details" divides into two quatrains (groups of four lines) and a concluding couplet (a group of two lines). This is pretty close to the form of an English (or "Shakespearean") sonnet, which typically uses *three* quatrains and a couplet. But with only two quatrains, this poem doesn't quite fit that scheme. Instead, this feels like a broken, unfinished version of a sonnet—a shape that fits right in with the poem's themes.

The majors, for example, have an *incomplete* picture of what the war is actually like. They encounter it remotely, directing battles from their comfortable hotel and never actually seeing any fighting. Meanwhile, the young men they send out to battle have their lives *cut short* by death.

This cut-off, not-quite-a-sonnet shape thus mirrors the poem's themes, and gestures to the terrible difference between the war as the majors experience it and the war as the soldiers experience it.

METER

"Base Details" uses iambic pentameter throughout. That means that each line uses five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, like this:

I'd live | with scar- | let Ma- | jors at | the Base,

Iambic pentameter is a very common meter in English-language poetry, and here it doesn't draw too much attention to itself, keeping the poem's bitterly satirical tone and vivid images in the foreground.

But its steady pulse also makes occasional variations more noticeable. Two such variations appear in lines 4 and 5:

You'd see | me with | my puf- | fy pet- | ulant face,
Guzzling | and gulp- | ing in | the best | hotel,

The extra syllable in "petulant" makes the last foot of line 4 an anapest, a foot with a da-da-DUM rhythm. That one-two-three rhythm has a nursery-rhyme sound—matching with the word "petulant" itself, which suggests the majors have childish, bratty faces. Note that there's also a trochee, a foot with a DUM-da rhythm, the second foot of line 4: "me with."

Another trochee opens line 5: "Guzzling." That strong first stress evokes the majors' voracious appetites—as if the line, like the majors, is eagerly lurching forward toward an extravagant dinner.

RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme in "Base Details" runs like this:

ABABCDCDEE

This echoes the rhyme scheme of an English (or "Shakespearean") sonnet: the only difference here is that a sonnet would use one more four-line quatrain. That missing set of rhymes makes the poem feel like it's cut short, mirroring both the distant, limited perspective of the majors *and* the cut-short lives of the young soldiers.

The rhyming pairs of "breath"/"death" (lines 1 and 3) and "dead"/"bed" (lines 9 and 10) also underline the poem's juxtaposition between the military elite and the young men who actually fight the war. The unfit majors struggle for *breath* because they spend their days indulging their appetites, while their decisions send thousands to *death*. And when the war is over, those thousands of war *dead* lie strewn across Europe—while the old men who held all the power die comfortably in *bed*.

SPEAKER

The only thing readers know for certain about the speaker is that he is *not* one of the "scarlet Majors" (the military elite). Rather, he imagines being one of them in order to express his resentment towards the way they run the war: even as the majors send thousands of young men to their deaths, they themselves indulge in food, drink, and comfort.

Sassoon, who served in World War I as a solider, draws on his own extensive war experience throughout his poetry; it's not a stretch to view the "I" here as the poet himself. The speaker, like Sassoon, clearly has a strong sense of the injustice, tragedy, and sheer waste of the First World War.

SETTING

Strictly speaking, "Base Details" is set in the speaker's imagination as he wonders what it would be like to be a "scarlet Major," as opposed to a regular soldier. While he's able to vividly imagine the "best hotel" he'd stay in, and the lavish food and drink he'd "guzzl[e] and gulp[]," he's not really there.

In fact, his indignation and disgust at the majors' self-indulgence suggests that he might be somewhere "up the line" himself, enduring the misery of trench warfare. The poem doesn't talk explicitly about the horrors of front-line experience, but it doesn't have to: they lurk in the background like ghosts.

Life for the majors at the base, the speaker imagines, is like being on holiday. And not just any holiday! The majors have the best food, drink, and comfortable bedrooms. This contrasts implicitly with the horrendous realities of life as a soldier: constant danger, insomnia, hunger, disease, and despair.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967) is one of the most significant of the English World War I poets, a group of writers who documented the horrors of war with outrage and compassion. Sassoon served in the war as a soldier, and his deeply-felt poetry draws on his own extensive wartime experience. This poem was published in Sassoon's 1918 collection *Counter-attack, and Other Poems*, which also includes famous works like "Suicide in the Trenches" and "Attack."

Sassoon, like a number of World War I soldiers, suffered from shellshock (which might today be called post-traumatic stress disorder). While he was hospitalized for this condition, Sassoon met fellow poet Robert Graves. The two writers agreed that poetry should convey the "gritty realism" of war, and rejected the sugary, romanticized work of war poets like Rupert Brooke (who didn't really know the reality of life in the trenches). Sassoon also befriended Wilfred Owen during his shellshock treatment and convinced the younger poet to work hard on his writing—to the benefit of readers ever since.

Sassoon earned a reputation for treating his subject with unflinching honesty. In this poem, for instance, he fearlessly criticizes the powerful men who sent thousands of young soldiers to their deaths.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

World War I, which ran from 1914 to 1918, was once thought to be the war to end all wars. Set in motion by the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the conflict pulled in most of the world like falling dominoes. France, Russia, and England were allied against Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy, although many other countries became involved too.

Initial optimism that the war would be over quickly soon gave way to the tragic—and ongoing—reality of trench warfare. World War I was famous for this horrendous fighting style, in which soldiers lived and fought in long pits dug into the earth, sometimes sunk up to their waists in mud, blood, and human waste. Sassoon, who served as a solider, knew this hellish landscape all too well. A renowned leader, he earned the nickname "Mad Jack" for his incredible feats of bravery. But "Base Details" doesn't describe the horrors of front-line combat, instead focusing on the parallel experiences of the "scarlet Majors," the men in charge of the army.

Significant advances in military technology, coupled with the bloodthirsty ambition of distant generals, meant that World War I killed an unprecedented number of young soldiers and civilians. The Western Front—the main area of fighting in Western Europe—has sometimes been likened to a meat-grinder, relentlessly crushing young lives. Indeed, the Roll of Honour—the official document listing the names of the war dead—became difficult to maintain due to the sheer number of men dying.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Sassoon's War Experience — Read a letter from Sassoon to his uncle, written shortly after Sassoon was wounded in battle. (https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/siegfried-sassoon-letters-to-his-uncle)
- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to "Base Details" read aloud by actor Rupert Mason. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WCM2aCR-63k)
- Footage from World War I — Watch a clip from director Peter Jackson's recent WWI documentary, They Shall Not Grow Old, and get a glimpse of the poem's world. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZY7RQAX_03ca)
- Counter-Attack and Other Poems — Explore the book in which "Base Details" first appeared. (https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/8930)
- Sassoon's Life and Work — Listen to a BBC Radio documentary about Siegfried Sassoon and his poetry. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ge2Y0oN-ee8)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER SIEGFRIED SASSOON POEMS

- Attack
- Suicide in the Trenches

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Howard, James. "*Base Details*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 14 Jun 2021. Web. 21 Jun 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Howard, James. "*Base Details*." LitCharts LLC, June 14, 2021. Retrieved June 21, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/siegfried-sassoon/base-details.