

The Death Bed



POEM TEXT

1 He drowsed and was aware of silence heaped
 2 Round him, unshaken as the steadfast walls;
 3 Aqueous like floating rays of amber light,
 4 Soaring and quivering in the wings of sleep.
 5 Silence and safety; and his mortal shore
 6 Lipped by the inward, moonless waves of death.

 7 Someone was holding water to his mouth.
 8 He swallowed, unresisting; moaned and dropped
 9 Through crimson gloom to darkness; and forgot
 10 The opiate throb and ache that was his wound.
 11 Water—calm, sliding green above the weir;
 12 Water—a sky-lit alley for his boat,
 13 Bird-voiced, and bordered with reflected flowers
 14 And shaken hues of summer: drifting down,
 15 He dipped contented oars, and sighed, and slept.

 16 Night, with a gust of wind, was in the ward,
 17 Blowing the curtain to a gummering curve.
 18 Night. He was blind; he could not see the stars
 19 Glinting among the wraiths of wandering cloud;
 20 Queer blots of colour, purple, scarlet, green,
 21 Flickered and faded in his drowning eyes.

 22 Rain—he could hear it rustling through the dark;
 23 Fragrance and passionless music woven as one;
 24 Warm rain on drooping roses; pattering showers
 25 That soak the woods; not the harsh rain that sweeps
 26 Behind the thunder, but a trickling peace,
 27 Gently and slowly washing life away.

 28 He stirred, shifting his body; then the pain
 29 Leaped like a prowling beast, and gripped and tore
 30 His groping dreams with grinding claws and fangs.
 31 But someone was beside him; soon he lay
 32 Shuddering because that evil thing had passed.
 33 And death, who'd stepped toward him, paused and
 stared.

 34 Light many lamps and gather round his bed.
 35 Lend him your eyes, warm blood, and will to live.
 36 Speak to him; rouse him; you may save him yet.

37 He's young; he hated war; how should he die
 38 When cruel old campaigners win safe through?

39 But death replied: "I choose him." So he went,
 40 And there was silence in the summer night;
 41 Silence and safety; and the veils of sleep.
 42 Then, far away, the thudding of the guns.



SUMMARY

A young man drifts in and out of sleep; silence surrounds him like a sturdy wall. He feels floaty, as if he is a ray of golden light hitting water. Asleep, he feels as if he's flying, and trembles. Everything seems quiet and safe. His consciousness is like a coastline, towards which death, like a strange tide, draws in ever closer.

Somebody gives the man a drink of water. He swallows it weakly. He moans in pain and slips into unconsciousness (described as a shift from a shadowy red atmosphere towards darkness). For a moment, he forgets about the drug-numbed pain of his war injury. He thinks of calm, green water flowing over a dam. He imagines he's on a boat, floating down a sunny stream. He hears birdsong, and sees flowers reflecting on the water, and the colors of summer rippling on the surface. He drifts further, rowing peacefully. He sighs and sleeps.

It is nighttime and wind is blowing through the hospital, making the curtain billow and ripple. It's night, but the dying man can't see anything. He can't see the twinkling stars among the ghost-like clouds traveling across the sky. All he sees is a strange mix of colors, purple, bright red, and green, which flash across his failing eyes.

The dying man hears rain falling in the dark. All at once he can smell this rain, and hear it as a kind of gentle music. He thinks of warm rain falling on flowers, or brief showers that drench the forest. This rain is not the punishing kind that follows thunder, but a gentle shower, rinsing the last of his life away.

The dying man wriggles, suddenly uncomfortable. Just then a great, beast-like pain jumps at him. It grabs and tears at his dreams with its sharp claws and teeth. He senses somebody next to him as that evil pain subsides, leaving him frightened. Death has arrived, and steps closer to him to take a long, lingering look.

Reader, light up the man's room and attend to him. Give him your eyes, your blood, and your desire to live. Speak to him and wake him up—he can still be saved. This man was merely a boy

and hated war. How can it be fair that he dies while the cold-hearted (and old) authorities who sent him here stay safe and warm?

Death answers: "I choose this man." And so the wounded soldier dies, and the summer night falls quiet. Everything seems silent and safe as the dying man slips into the big sleep of death. Then there's a sound in the distance: the dull thud of firing guns.



THEMES



THE TRAGEDY OF WAR

"The Deathbed" imagines the last moments of a young World War I soldier as he lies dying in the hospital. Wounded and drugged into a stupor, the soldier drifts in and out of consciousness and *almost* passes peacefully—until, at last, he suffers a terrible spasm of pain and meets Death face to face. Through this young man's poignant and terrible death, the poem highlights the tragedy, senselessness, and cruelty of war.

At the outset, the poem deceptively paints the young soldier's hospital deathbed as a peaceful, gentle place to be: a place of rest that offers some relief from all the suffering the war has inflicted on him. The speaker's descriptive language paints the soldier's imminent death in almost romantic terms. Silence surrounds the man "like floating rays of amber light," and "his mortal shore" is lapped gently by "moonless waves of death." Drugged to sleep, he can even forget the "throb and ache" of the war wound that's killing him.

Soon enough, the soldier's mind drifts towards idyllic pictures of a day out boating, perhaps a memory from his pre-war life. He feels himself floating on "calm" water, listening to birdsong. He's surrounded by flowers and the bright "hues of summer." In a word, he is "contented." He feels a "trickling peace," and it looks like this is the end.

But just when he's about to die, the young soldier suffers a dreadful spasm of pain. The poem thus catches the reader by surprise, reminding them of the true horrors of war: not even this poor soldier's inner world can escape war's destruction. The pain of the soldier's wounds attacks him like an animal, tearing up his peaceful visions "with grinding claws and fangs." The image suggests that not just the soldier's body, but his dreams are broken by the war that has killed him.

That point becomes even clearer when a personified death arrives to "choose" the soldier. Here, the speaker turns to the reader in horror, asking if anyone can offer the poor soldier "eyes, warm blood, and will to live," and wonders why he must die when "cruel old campaigners"—the powerful men in charge of the war—remain "safe." But of course, there are no answers and no explanations forthcoming: the poor soldier's death, the

poem insists through these rhetorical questions, was completely senseless.

This awful tragedy, the poem concludes, is just one among countless thousands, and it won't stop there. The war will go on and on in spite of its obvious pointlessness and cruelty. As Death leads the soldier away, there's the sound of the "thudding of the guns" in the distance—a sound that implies a tragic *continuation* of war, making it clear that humanity learns nothing from the deaths so many of its own children.

The poem thus ends by evoking the sheer unrelenting tragedy of war—highlighting that it's the innocent young who often suffer most, and that their deaths are a complete waste of precious human life.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-42



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-6

*He drowsed and was aware of silence heaped
Round him, unshaken as the steadfast walls;
Aqueous like floating rays of amber light,
Soaring and quivering in the wings of sleep.
Silence and safety; and his mortal shore
Lipped by the inward, moonless waves of death.*

This poem describes the final moments in the life of a young WWI soldier as he lies wounded and dying in a hospital. The opening stanza sets the scene, creating an evocative and mysterious picture of the man's state of mind. The speaker is an omniscient narrator, able to describe the dying man's thoughts, feelings, and sensations.

At first, the whole death bed experience seems quite peaceful (albeit very strange!). In these opening lines, the dying man drifts in and out of consciousness. Here (and throughout the poem) [metaphors](#), [similes](#), and [images](#) fly thick and fast, evoking the man's fractured, dreamlike mental state.

The man is surrounded by silence, which "heap[s]" around him like sturdy "walls."

- On the one hand, this suggests a kind of safety and perhaps even comfort in this state (especially compared to the atrocious soundscape of the battlefield that he presumably experienced before arriving at this hospital).
- Alternatively, this might suggest that his hearing has been damaged from serving in the war. That the silence has agency here (it actively surrounds the man) also makes him seem helpless.

In the next line, it's not totally clear whether the [simile](#) "Aqueous like floating rays of amber light" refers to this silence or to the man's state of mind more generally. Either way, this image of watery, golden light flowing around the man evokes both a womb-like comfort and a kind of heavenly afterlife. It's as though the dying man is surrounded by the famous white light linked with near-death experiences. Both "aqueous" and "floating" are also at odds with the "steadfast walls" image. It's *within* this cocoon of total silence—within his own mind, cut off from the activity of the outside world—that he's experiencing this floating sensation.

Then, in line 4, the speaker says that the man is "Soaring and quivering in the wings of sleep." This metaphor again evokes heaven and the afterlife, portraying sleep as something comforting and angelic that flies upward.

The speaker sums up the young man's state as "Silence and safety" in line 5. The [sibilance](#) of this phrase creates a hushed, sleepy, and peaceful tone. The man is near to death, which is cast here as a kind of ocean. The man's life, body, and consciousness, meanwhile, become a shoreline. There's no moon above, and death's dark waves steadily creep inward onto that "mortal shore"—a poetic description of death eroding the young man's consciousness/sense of self/vitality. Soon, the poem suggests, those waves will gobble him up; he will dissolve into the limitless ocean of non-being.

LINES 7-10

*Someone was holding water to his mouth.
He swallowed, unresisting; moaned and dropped
Through crimson gloom to darkness; and forgot
The opiate throb and ache that was his wound.*

At the start of line 7, the speaker breaks up the dreamy, peaceful [imagery](#) presented in the first stanza. Now, the poem wrestles the young man back into the real world, the world of the living that surrounds him, for a moment:

Someone was holding water to his mouth.
He swallowed, unresisting; [...]

While the man is floating around on "the wings of sleep," his physical body is on his death bed. His body is powerless ("unresisting"), and he needs help even to drink water. Notice how he doesn't know the identity of his helper—they are just a vague "Someone," suggesting that his mind is losing touch with the *particulars* of reality.

The dying man slips back out of consciousness, letting out moans and moving through "crimson gloom" to "darkness." Notice how the poem uses dull, muffled/m/ and/d/ [consonance](#) to suggest this strange, confusing state:

[he] moaned and dropped
Through crimson gloom to darkness.

The color crimson suggests blood and injury, and that deep red gloom seems to refer to his conscious awareness of his bodily pain. He's on some serious medication as well, the speaker reveals, mentioning the "opiate throb and ache that was his wound."

LINES 11-15

*Water—calm, sliding green above the weir;
Water—a sky-lit alley for his boat,
Bird-voiced, and bordered with reflected flowers
And shaken hues of summer: drifting down,
He dipped contented oars, and sighed, and slept.*

The combination of water, fading consciousness, and opium seem to conjure up a lovely rural scene in the soldier's imagination. He sees:

Water—calm, sliding green above the weir;
Water—a sky-lit alley for his boat,

In other words, the dying man feels like he's on a boat "sliding" across peaceful water on a beautiful sunlit day. This could be a memory plucked from happier days, or simply something that the soldier's brain has constructed to make him feel better.

The lines have a beautiful, push-pull rhythm created by the [anaphora](#) of "water" and the em-dash [caesura](#). Both lines have the sound of oars moving in the water.

This dreamy, beautiful image is made even more so by lines 13 to 15, which also use gentle [consonance](#) and [alliteration](#):

Bird-voiced, and bordered with reflected flowers
And shaken hues of summer: drifting down,
He dipped contented oars, and sighed, and slept.

It's as though there is a spell being cast over both the dying man and the poem itself. The birds, flowers, and colors of summer make a marked contrast with the soldier's horrific real-life situation.

Both lines 14 and 15 use perfect [iambic](#) pentameter (lines of five iambs, poetic units with an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern), evoking the motion of the young man's (imaginary) oars and the calmness of the scene:

And shak- | en hues | of sum- | mer: drift- | ing down,
He dipped | content- | ed oars, | and sighed, | and
slept.

These rhythms are like a softly-sung lullaby, pulling the young man towards the ultimate sleep of death.

This whole boat-trip scene might also be an [allusion](#) to classical mythology. In Greek myth, the souls of the newly deceased had to cross the river Styx from the land of the living to the

underworld. Either way, at this stage in the poem everything seems perhaps *unsettlingly* pleasant.

LINES 16-21

*Night, with a gust of wind, was in the ward,
Blowing the curtain to a gummuring curve.
Night. He was blind; he could not see the stars
Glinting among the wraiths of wandering cloud;
Queer blots of colour, purple, scarlet, green,
Flickered and faded in his drowning eyes.*

The third stanza breaks away from the dreamy boat scene and brings the poem back into the hospital ward where the young man lies dying. Things take an ominous turn as the darkness of night seems to blow into the hospital ward on a "gust of wind." Notice how [alliteration](#) of the breathy /w/ sounds evokes the wind's movement:

Night, with a gust of wind, was in the ward,

That dark wind puffs out the "curtain" into a "curve," the sounds of the lines again calling attention to the movement happening around the soldier stuck in bed.

Line 19 then repeats the word "Night," emphasizing the arrival of darkness—something that, [symbolically](#), is linked with death. The soldier's end, it seems, is getting closer.

Not only is the soldier surrounded by silence; now, the speaker says, he's "blind," unable to see the stars that glimmer in the night sky between "the wraiths of wandering cloud." The speaker is presenting the wispy clouds as ghosts here, which is in keeping with the idea that night and darkness represent death. The man's blindness also creates tension: he can't see the beauty of the "glinting" stars, nor can he see the signs of death swirling by.

Lines 20 to 21 then paint an impressionistic picture of what the dying man *can* see and use more alliteration and [consonance](#) to bring this [imagery](#) to life: "Queer" (or strange) "blots of colour, purple, scarlet, green, / Flickered and faded in his drowning eyes." The liquid /l/, sharp /k/, and muffled /f/ sounds evoke the splotchy masses of color that "flicker" in front of the man, giving the reader a visual sense of the man's fading consciousness.

The phrase "drowning eyes" is a [metaphorical](#) way of describing the fact that his eyes, like the rest of him, are dying, being pulled beneath the surface of consciousness. This metaphor also echoes the imagery from earlier in the poem, when the speaker compared death to a dark ocean creeping up on the soldier's "mortal shore" and when the man imagined gliding along calm water in a boat. He's no longer above the water, but being drawn into its depths.

LINES 22-27

*Rain—he could hear it rustling through the dark;
Fragrance and passionless music woven as one;*

*Warm rain on drooping roses; pattering showers
That soak the woods; not the harsh rain that sweeps
Behind the thunder, but a trickling peace,
Gently and slowly washing life away.*

While the third stanza focused on what the dying man can't see, the fourth focuses on what he can and can't hear.

There's rain, but it's unclear if this is in real life or in the soldier's imagination. Either way, its presence comes across as pleasant and soothing, an effect reflected by the tender sound patterning of these lines.

There's the /r/ [alliteration](#) of "rain," "rustling," and "roses; the gentle /w/ sounds of "woven," "one," and "warm"; the lilting /l/ [consonance](#) of "gently," "slowly," and "life"; the shared alliteration and [assonance](#) of "passionless" and "pattering"; and the [sibilance](#) throughout the entire stanza, which is filled with /s/, /z/, and /sh/ sounds:

Rain—he could hear it rustling through the dark;
Fragrance and passionless music woven as one;
Warm rain on drooping roses; pattering showers
That soak the woods; not the harsh rain that sweeps
Behind the thunder, but a trickling peace,
Gently and slowly washing life away.

This section is like a beautiful painting made entirely out of sound. Note, too, how [enjambment](#) after "showers" and "sweeps" lends the lines a sense of fluid—indeed, "sweeping"—momentum that reflects the falling motion of the rain.

This rain isn't the "harsh," pounding rain that comes along with a thunderstorm, but rather a gentle, "trickling peace," something that delicately, gingerly "washes life away." Again, then, the speaker [symbolically](#) links water with death.

Here, the patter of rain suggests the man's dissolving consciousness and the way that everything that once seemed so significant and meaningful begins to trickle away from him.

LINES 28-33

*He stirred, shifting his body; then the pain
Leaped like a prowling beast, and gripped and tore
His groping dreams with grinding claws and fangs.
But someone was beside him; soon he lay
Shuddering because that evil thing had passed.
And death, who'd stepped toward him, paused and stared.*

Life *still* hasn't left the soldier just yet. In fact, all that calm and pleasant [imagery](#) that came earlier—the rays of light, the boat trip, the "trickling peace" of falling rain—was the pretext to a horrible, painful death. The reader has been lulled into a false bubble of security that is now violently punctured by the soldier's physical reality:

He stirred, shifting his body; then the pain
Leaped like a prowling beast, and gripped and tore
His groping dreams with grinding claws and fangs.

As the dying man moves just a little bit, the pain of his fatal wound suddenly shoots through him. The poem uses [simile](#) here to portray this pain as "a prowling beast" that tears at his dreams "with grinding claws and fangs." It's a horrible image that undoes all the soothing imagery that came before. His pain here is like a primal force unleashed by his experiences in the war.

For a moment, then, the horror, tragedy, and wastefulness of war take center stage as the young man is denied the small grace of a peaceful death. His dreams of boats and gentle rain prove too weak to withstand the reality of his pain. Notice the violent [alliteration](#) of "gripped," "groping," and "grinding," which manages to actually *sound* painful, like chalk on a blackboard.

In line 31, "someone" once again visits the dying man. It's unclear whether this is the same kind of someone who earlier gave him a drink of water or not. More likely, it seems to be death, [personified](#). The terrible, beast-like pain subsides, but it leaves the young man feeling frightened and confused.

After line 33's [end-stop](#), death steps dramatically into the spotlight:

And death, who'd stepped toward him, paused and
stared.

Death seems to be sizing the soldier up, deciding whether he wants to take him or not. There's something cold and haunting about the way death takes his time while the young man continues to suffer.

LINES 34-38

*Light many lamps and gather round his bed.
Lend him your eyes, warm blood, and will to live.
Speak to him; rouse him; you may save him yet.
He's young; he hated war; how should he die
When cruel old campaigners win safe through?*

In the penultimate stanza, the speaker suddenly and dramatically changes the poem's mode of address. Whereas before the speaker has been acting as an omniscient, detached narrator, this stanza is directly targeted at "you." Who is this you? It could be the British public around the time the poem was written, or it could be whoever reads the poem.

In any case, the speaker uses an imperative voice, instructing this "you" to:

Light many lamps and gather round his bed.
Lend him your eyes, warm blood, and will to live.

In short, the speaker is saying "help this dying man." Either help him die peacefully by creating a warm, loving atmosphere or, better still, give him the consciousness ("your eyes"), the "warm blood," and the willpower he needs to survive. [End-stops](#) in this stanza make these imperative sentences dramatic and confrontational. Of course, these instructions are intentionally futile: there is no saving this wounded soldier.

In lines 36 and 37, the speaker uses short, sharp phrases in a technique known as [parataxis](#):

Speak to him; rouse him; you may save him yet.
He's young; he hated war;

These brief sentences create a sense of doomed urgency. It's like the speaker is crying, "do something!"—all the while knowing that nothing can be done. The speaker emphasizes that the soldier hated war and was young, highlighting the tragedy and wastefulness of this death. And this man is just one among millions slain in battle.

The poem concludes these desperate imperatives with a single [rhetorical question](#):

[...] how should he die
When cruel old campaigners win safe through?

In other words, how can it be fair that countless young men have to die, frightened and in terrible pain, when those *responsible* for the war—those "cruel old campaigners"—stay safe and comfortable, away from the grim realities of life on the front-line? War, the poem suggests, is fundamentally unjust.

LINES 39-42

*But death replied: "I choose him." So he went,
And there was silence in the summer night;
Silence and safety; and the veils of sleep.
Then, far away, the thudding of the guns.*

In the poem's final stanza, death gets his way and chooses to take the young boy away from earthly life:

But death replied: "I choose him." So he went,
And there was silence in the summer night;

Notice how this is a *reply*. It's [personified](#) death's stiff, cold, uncaring response to the previous stanza, in which the speaker highlighted war's unfair, tragic waste of human life. Death's monosyllabic speech implies a total lack of empathy for this tragedy: caring about people is *not* his job. The prosaic "So he went" is so plain and unceremonial that it sounds blunt and uncaring too.

At last, the young man slips into the "silence" of death, and the [sibilance](#) of these final lines creates a whispery, sleepy tone:

And there was silence in the summer night;
Silence and safety; and the veils of sleep.

The poem also repeats an earlier phrase here—"Silence and safety"—and suggests that the soldier is finally covered by "the veils of sleep" (the big sleep of death). Finally, it seems, he is out of his misery. The [end-stop](#) after "sleep" provides a sense of closure.

Closure, though, is not in this poem's style. As soon as the young man dies, a familiar sound picks up in the distance:

Then, far away, the thudding of the guns.

That is, in this war, peace is a mere momentary illusion. The sound of guns *ends* the poem, effectively granting them—and war—the final word. There is no resolution, then, and no genuine release. It's not clear if this is a real sound—perhaps the man dies near where he was wounded—or perhaps it's a metaphor for the way humanity still inflicts such misery on itself. The /u/ [assonance](#) on "thudding" and "guns" has a horrible, weighty quality that evokes the violence of armed conflict, and ensures the poem leaves the reader feeling no false comfort.



POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

This poem is full of [alliteration](#), which helps to intensify its [imagery](#). Sometimes, this creates a peaceful, idyllic atmosphere that is sadly too good to be true; in other moments, it does the complete opposite, conjuring up fright and horror.

In the first two stanzas, alliteration helps lull the reader into a false sense of security. The dying man drifts in and out of consciousness:

Soaring and quivering in the wings of sleep.
Silence and safety; [...]

These [sibilant](#) sounds feel gentle and whispery, almost like sleepy breathing.

And the following stanza uses dense alliteration to even more musical effect:

Water—calm, sliding green above the weir;
Water—a sky-lit alley for his boat,
Bird-voiced, and bordered with reflected flowers
And shaken hues of summer: drifting down,
He dipped contented oars, and sighed, and slept.

Put simply, all of these little echoing sounds make for an extremely pretty passage. If the poem ended here, the soldier's

death wouldn't seem so bad at all!

But the whole point of this section is that it is *too* pretty—that is, it's not real. The comfort and security of the first two stanzas ultimately exist only to make the ending more chilling.

Contrast the above passages with lines 29 and 30, which describe the young man's sudden pain just before he dies:

He stirred, shifting his body; then the pain
Leaped like a prowling beast, and gripped and tore
His groping dreams with grinding claws and fangs.

These grating /gr/ sounds and slap-like /p/ sounds suggest violence, and all the more so because of their contrast with the sweet sounds earlier in the poem.

At the end, the poem returns to sibilant /s/ alliteration:

But death replied: "I choose him." So he went,
And there was silence in the summer night;
Silence and safety; and the veils of sleep.

But now these /s/ sounds don't suggest comfort, but the creepy whisper of death.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "Soaring," "sleep"
- **Line 5:** "Silence," "safety"
- **Line 10:** "was," "wound"
- **Line 11:** "Water," "weir"
- **Line 12:** "Water," "boat"
- **Line 13:** "Bird-voiced," "bordered"
- **Line 14:** "drifting down"
- **Line 15:** "dipped," "sighed," "slept"
- **Line 16:** "with," "wind," "was," "ward"
- **Line 17:** "curtain," "curve"
- **Line 18:** "see," "stars"
- **Line 21:** "Flickered," "faded"
- **Line 22:** "Rain," "rustling"
- **Line 23:** "woven," "one"
- **Line 24:** "rain," "roses"
- **Line 28:** "pain"
- **Line 29:** "prowling," "gripped"
- **Line 30:** "groping," "grinding"
- **Line 34:** "Light," "lamps"
- **Line 35:** "Lend"
- **Line 37:** "he hated," "how," "he"
- **Line 38:** "cruel," "campaigners"
- **Line 39:** "So"
- **Line 40:** "silence," "summer"
- **Line 41:** "Silence," "safety," "sleep"

CAESURA

[Caesura](#) occurs in almost every line of the poem. Its rhythmic effects often enhance the poem's [imagery](#) or create an emotional impact.

In line 6, for example, a simple comma provides a rocking, tidal motion that fits with the imagery of "waves":

Silence and safety; || and his mortal shore
Lipped by the inward, || moonless waves of death.

In other words, the sentence itself becomes wave-like through caesura.

Lines 11-15 are the poem's most peaceful section, conjuring an idyllic scene probably based on the dying man's memories. This section is full of caesura:

Water— || calm, || sliding green above the weir;
Water— || a sky-lit alley for his boat,
Bird-voiced, || and bordered with reflected flowers
And shaken hues of summer: || drifting down,
He dipped contented oars, || and sighed, || and slept.

Notice how the two em-dashes in lines 11 and 12 slow the poem right down, as if it is floating on the page without a care on the world. The two commas in the last line quoted above, combined with the end-stop that follows, bring the stanza to a blissful rest. If only, for the soldier's sake, the poem ended there! Of course, this is all part of how the poem creates a false sense of peace.

But caesura can also suggest restlessness:

He stirred, || shifting his body; || then the pain
Leaped like a prowling beast, || and gripped and tore
His groping dreams with grinding claws and fangs.

Here, thanks to caesura, it's like the poem itself is twisting and writhing in pain.

It's also worth noting how final the mid-line period sounds in line 39, when [personified](#) death says "I choose him." There's something terrifying about that little silence, especially as the man's actual death, when it finally comes, is presented so prosaically: "So he went." The period creates a poignant, painful emptiness.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "him, unshaken"
- **Line 5:** "safety; and"
- **Line 6:** "inward, moonless"
- **Line 8:** "swallowed, unresisting; moaned"
- **Line 9:** "darkness; and"

- **Line 11:** "Water—calm, sliding"
- **Line 12:** "Water—a"
- **Line 13:** "Bird-voiced, and"
- **Line 14:** "summer: drifting"
- **Line 15:** "oars, and," "sighed, and"
- **Line 16:** "Night, with," "wind, was"
- **Line 18:** "Night. He," "blind; he"
- **Line 20:** "colour, purple, scarlet, green,"
- **Line 22:** "Rain—he"
- **Line 24:** "roses; pattering"
- **Line 25:** "woods; not"
- **Line 26:** "thunder, but"
- **Line 28:** "stirred, shifting," "body; then"
- **Line 29:** "beast, and"
- **Line 31:** "him; soon"
- **Line 33:** "death, who'd," "him, paused"
- **Line 35:** "eyes, warm," "blood, and"
- **Line 36:** "him; rouse," "him; you"
- **Line 37:** "young; he," "war; how"
- **Line 39:** "replied: "I," "him." So"
- **Line 41:** "afety; and"
- **Line 42:** "Then, far," "away, the"

CONSONANCE

"The Death Bed" is packed full of [consonance](#). In general, this device heightens the poem's [imagery](#): if what's being described seems nice, consonance makes it more so; if it's something horrible, consonance makes sure it *sounds* horrible.

For instance, check out the delicate sounds in the fourth stanza:

Rain—he could hear it rustling through the dark;
Fragrance and passionless music woven as one;
Warm rain on drooping roses; pattering showers
That soak the woods; not the harsh rain that sweeps
Behind the thunder, but a trickling peace,
Gently and slowly washing life away.

The quiet consonance here means that, while the imagery relates to death, it *sounds* incredibly gentle and peaceful. The soldier's life is "washing away," and it doesn't seem so bad.

But the beauty of that stanza gets swept away by the onset of horrible pain. The poem changes its sound patterning to match:

He stirred, shifting his body; then the pain
Leaped like a prowling beast, and gripped and tore
His groping dreams with grinding claws and fangs.

These sounds are harsh and horrible, fitting for the arrival of this primal pain. The plosive /p/ and grinding /gr/ are particularly unsettling and violent.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** “steadfast walls”
- **Line 3:** “Aqueous,” “light”
- **Lines 3-3:** “like / floating”
- **Line 4:** “Soaring,” “wings,” “sleep”
- **Line 5:** “Silence,” “safety”
- **Line 8:** “moaned and dropped”
- **Line 9:** “crimson gloom”
- **Line 10:** “was,” “wound”
- **Line 11:** “Water,” “weir”
- **Line 12:** “Water,” “lit alley,” “boat”
- **Line 13:** “Bird-voiced,” “bordered,” “reflected flowers”
- **Line 14:** “drifting down”
- **Line 15:** “dipped contented,” “sighed,” “slept”
- **Line 16:** “with,” “gust,” “wind,” “was,” “ward”
- **Line 17:** “curtain,” “curve”
- **Line 18:** “see,” “stars”
- **Line 19:** “cloud”
- **Line 20:** “Queer,” “blots,” “colour,” “purple,” “scarlet”
- **Line 21:** “Flickered,” “faded”
- **Line 22:** “Rain,” “hear,” “rustling”
- **Line 23:** “Fragrance,” “passionless,” “woven,” “one”
- **Line 24:** “rain,” “drooping,” “roses,” “pattering,” “showers”
- **Line 25:** “soak,” “woods,” “harsh,” “sweeps”
- **Line 26:** “trickling,” “peace”
- **Line 27:** “Gently,” “slowly,” “washing,” “life,” “away”
- **Line 28:** “pain”
- **Lines 29-29:** “Leaped / like”
- **Line 29:** “prowling,” “gripped”
- **Line 30:** “groping”
- **Lines 30-30:** “grindin / g”
- **Line 31:** “someone,” “beside,” “soon”
- **Line 34:** “Light,” “lamps”
- **Line 35:** “Lend,” “warm,” “blood,” “will,” “live”
- **Line 37:** “He's,” “he hated,” “how,” “he”
- **Line 38:** “cruel old campaigners”
- **Line 39:** “So”
- **Line 40:** “silence,” “summer”
- **Line 41:** “Silence,” “safety,” “veils,” “sleep”

END-STOPPED LINE

[End-stopped lines](#) create dramatic pauses and ratchet up the tension of the young soldier's death.

Often, end-stops emphasize words that relate literally or metaphorically to death: “sleep” (line 4), “death” (line 6), “dark” (line 22), “away” (line 27), “passed” (line 32). But none of these examples actually describe the moment when the soldier dies. In other words, end-stops create false endings—and gathering tension. Think how different the poem would be, for example, if line 15's “slept” really was the end:

[...] drifting down,

He dipped contented oars, and sighed, and slept.

This “slept” creates a real sense of peace and calm—but it's false and fleeting.

Even the final “sleep,” when the soldier dies in line 42, uses an end-stop as a false resolution. At this point, the reader might think: *At least this poor soldier is out of his misery now.* But there's one more line still to come:

Then, far away, the thudding of the guns.

In other words, the war that killed the young man is still going on; his death means nothing in the grand scheme of things. The final end-stop of the poem emphasizes “guns”—the ongoing violence and brutality of war, not the release of death.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-2:** “walls / ;”
- **Line 3:** “light, ”
- **Line 4:** “sleep.”
- **Line 6:** “death.”
- **Line 7:** “mouth.”
- **Line 10:** “wound.”
- **Line 11:** “weir;”
- **Line 12:** “boat, ”
- **Line 14:** “down, ”
- **Line 15:** “slept.”
- **Line 17:** “curve.”
- **Line 19:** “cloud;”
- **Line 20:** “green,”
- **Line 21:** “eyes.”
- **Line 22:** “dark;”
- **Line 23:** “one;”
- **Line 26:** “peace, ”
- **Line 27:** “away.”
- **Line 30:** “fangs.”
- **Line 32:** “passed.”
- **Line 33:** “stared.”
- **Line 34:** “bed.”
- **Line 35:** “live.”
- **Line 36:** “yet.”
- **Line 38:** “through?”
- **Line 39:** “went,”
- **Line 40:** “night;”
- **Line 41:** “sleep.”
- **Line 42:** “guns.”

ENJAMBMENT

The poem uses [enjambments](#) to create complexity and surprise and to mirror the young soldier's experiences in the poem's shape.

For example, notice how the enjambment between lines 8 and

9 reflects what's being described:

He swallowed, unresisting; moaned and **dropped**
Through crimson gloom to darkness;

As the dying man drops down through another layer of his consciousness, the sentence itself drops down a line on the page.

A similar falling effect occurs in lines 24-27, which describe a pleasant, refreshing rainfall:

Warm rain on drooping roses; pattering **showers**
That soak the woods; not the harsh rain that **sweeps**
Behind the thunder, but a trickling **peace** [...]

These continuous lines themselves seem to "gently and slowly" wash past, creating a sense of calm and quiet.

This effect is swiftly undercut by the violent imagery of the following stanza—which uses shockingly abrupt enjambment:

He stirred, shifting his body; then the **pain**
Leaped like a prowling beast, and gripped and **tore**
His groping dreams with grinding claws and fangs.

This enjambment violently breaks into the middle of sentences, emphasizing the dying man's pain. That "Leaped" just jumps off the page!

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "heaped / Round"
- **Lines 3-4:** "light, / Soaring"
- **Lines 5-6:** "shore / Lipped"
- **Lines 8-9:** "dropped / Through"
- **Lines 9-10:** "forgot / The"
- **Lines 13-14:** "flowers / And"
- **Lines 16-17:** "ward, / Blowing"
- **Lines 18-19:** "stars / Glinting"
- **Lines 24-25:** "showers / That"
- **Lines 25-26:** "sweeps / Behind"
- **Lines 28-29:** "pain / Leaped"
- **Lines 29-30:** "tore / His"
- **Lines 31-32:** "lay / Shuddering"
- **Lines 37-38:** "die / When"

IMAGERY

"The Death Bed" is filled with [imagery](#), much of it evoking the dying man's ebbing consciousness; dosed up to his eyeballs with opiate painkillers, he drifts through his own private dreamscape. This imagery builds a falsely reassuring vision of a peaceful death that the poem eventually rips apart.

In the first stanza, for example, sensory impressions seem to

overlap, merging sights and sounds:

He drowsed and was aware of **silence heaped**
Round him, unshaken as the steadfast walls;
Aqueous like floating rays of amber light,
Soaring and quivering in the wings of sleep.
Silence and safety; [...]

Silence here suggests safety. Imagery like "floating rays of amber light" and "the wings of sleep" suggests both a womb-like comfort and a heavenly afterlife—as if the soldier is about to slip painlessly from one kind of peace to another. But in reality, the soldier will soon die in horrendous pain.

When he wakes up enough for a drink of water, the soldier has a vision—possibly a memory—that is completely at odds with the horrific realities of war:

Water—**calm, sliding green above the weir**;
Water—a sky-lit alley for his boat,
Bird-voiced, and bordered with reflected flowers
And shaken hues of summer: drifting down,
He dipped contented oars, and sighed, and slept.

Drug-induced dreaming helps him forget "his wound," transporting him to an idyllic, pastoral world. He's floating on water, and all the sensations he experiences are pleasant: the birds singing, the sight of flowers reflecting on the surface, the rhythm of the oars. If the poem ended here, it wouldn't be so bad!

Lines 22-27 work similarly, focusing on sounds:

Rain—he could hear it **rustling through the dark**;
Fragrance and passionless music woven as one;
Warm rain on drooping roses; pattering showers
That soak the woods; not the harsh rain that sweeps
Behind the thunder, but a **trickling peace**,
Gently and slowly washing life away.

It's not clear if this is real rain, or imagined. What a joy it would be, though, to listen to the sound of rain falling in the woods and be far away from the fighting! The sensory beauty of this imagery is a far cry from the realities of war and "the harsh rain" of artillery bombs.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-6:** "silence heaped / Round him, unshaken as the steadfast walls; / Aqueous like floating rays of amber light, / Soaring and quivering in the wings of sleep. / Silence and safety; and his mortal shore / Lipped by the inward, moonless waves of death."
- **Lines 11-15:** "Water—calm, sliding green above the weir;

/ Water—a sky-lit alley for his boat, / Bird-voiced, and bordered with reflected flowers / And shaken hues of summer: drifting down, / He dipped contented oars, and sighed, and slept.”

- **Lines 20-21:** “Queer blots of colour, purple, scarlet, green, / Flickered and faded in his drowning eyes.”
- **Lines 22-27:** “Rain—he could hear it rustling through the dark; / Fragrance and passionless music woven as one; / Warm rain on drooping roses; pattering showers / That soak the woods; / not the harsh rain that sweeps / Behind the thunder, but a trickling peace, / Gently and slowly washing life away.”

METAPHOR

"The Death Bed" uses [metaphor](#) to create a sense of what it's like to be close to death. Of course, this is not something most people know first-hand, so metaphor helps the poem—and the reader—imagine it!

The poem drifts through different metaphorical worlds and ideas, mirroring the dying man's loose grip on consciousness. Take the dreamlike image at the end of the first stanza:

[...] and his mortal shore
Lipped by the inward, moonless waves of death.

By "mortal shore," the poem means the man's life itself. Death approaches him in ebbs and flows of numbness and pain—like waves. Here, the man's time on earth seems as if it's being eroded away by those steady "moonless waves."

Other metaphors more explicitly suggest the soldier's nearness to death:

- The clouds in the sky are like "wraiths" (or ghosts), eerie ambassadors from another world.
- And the man's eyes are "drowning" in dim washes of color.

Other metaphors create an atmosphere of contentment and calm: for instance, the "music" of the rain, and the "trickling peace [...] washing life away" as if it were water. But alas, even the delicate "veils of sleep" that metaphorically represent the release of death are soon replaced by the "thudding of the guns."

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** “silence heaped / Round him”
- **Lines 5-6:** “his mortal shore / Lipped by the inward, moonless waves of death.”
- **Line 19:** “the wraiths of wandering cloud;”
- **Line 21:** “his drowning eyes”

- **Line 23:** “Fragrance and passionless music woven as one;”
- **Lines 26-27:** “a trickling peace / , / Gently and slowly washing life away.”
- **Line 30:** “His groping dreams”
- **Line 41:** “the veils of sleep.”

PARATAXIS

The poem uses [parataxis](#) in the next-to-last stanza. This stanza marks an important shift in which the speaker, who up to this point has been a distant omniscient narrator, suddenly seems to address the reader directly:

Speak to him; rouse him; you may save him yet.
He's young; he hated war; how should he die
When cruel old campaigners win safe through?

These short, sharp phrases have an urgent, accusatory tone. They don't accuse the reader as an individual, but humanity as a whole, asking someone—anyone—to save the poor young soldier, whose imminent death is so clearly cruel and senseless.

The urgency might also relate to what's literally happening around the young soldier as the staff in the hospital frantically try—and fail—to save his life.

In other words, parataxis creates a sense of desperation that reflects the tragedy and waste of war. Parataxis also *accelerates* the poem to its inevitable grim conclusion: the young man's death (there is, in reality, no saving him). And it builds towards the poem's central [rhetorical question](#), which cries out against the injustice that so many young men die in horrible pain when those responsible for the war stay safe and warm.

Where Parataxis appears in the poem:

- **Lines 36-37:** “Speak to him; rouse him; you may save him yet. / He's young; he hated war;”

PERSONIFICATION

Death appears in [personified](#) form toward the end of the poem, making a dramatic entrance. This is a classic piece of personification that will be familiar to many readers: death is often presented as a conscious, humanoid figure. Here, death's arrival is made all the more shocking and frightening by the fact it doesn't happen until line 33:

And death, who'd stepped toward him, paused and stared.

Death is in no hurry and creepily takes its time to look over its new victim. There is a coldness to this pause that speaks to war's indiscriminate hunger for human lives.

The speaker tries in vain to get the reader to rescue the dying man from this personified death. But death—a creature of few words—replies simply: "I choose him." The spareness of this sentence—its complete lack of emotion—is deeply unsettling. Suddenly, all of the beautiful imagery of water and nature found earlier in the poem seems meaningless: once death chooses someone, their time is up.

But this moment of personification subtly suggests that the soldier's tragic death wasn't inevitable: he didn't *have* to go this way. It was *people's* choices, as much as any personified creature's, that brought this young man to his doom.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 33:** "And death, who'd stepped toward him, paused and stared."
- **Line 39:** "But death replied: "I choose him.""

REPETITION

Various forms of [repetition](#) give "The Death Bed" drama and music.

For instance, listen to the echoing [diacope](#) in the fourth stanza:

Rain—he could hear it rustling through the dark;
Fragrance and passionless music woven as one;
Warm rain on drooping roses; pattering showers
That soak the woods; not the harsh rain that sweeps
Behind the thunder, but a trickling peace,

The word "rain" falls throughout these lines like rainfall itself, mimicking the "pattering" sound the speaker describes. It's a pleasant sonic effect that fits with the calm, meditative [imagery](#).

The poem also repeats the phrase "Silence and safety" twice: once near the beginning of the poem, and once near the end. But whereas the first use of the phrase seems comforting, describing the speaker sound asleep, the second is transformed by everything that has taken place in the poem before it. The word "safety" becomes ironic: now, the soldier is only safe because he's dead. And that "silence" doesn't last for long: the guns soon sound again in the distance.

Describing the dying man's drugged-up dreaming, the poem paints idyllic pictures of nature. The second stanza does so with [anaphora](#):

Water—calm, sliding green above the weir;
Water—a sky-lit alley for his boat,

This repetition creates a calming, gently rocking rhythm, producing a sense of peace and security that the poem will soon shatter.

The penultimate stanza fires off repetition in three different

forms: [parallelism](#), [polyptoton](#), and [anaphora](#):

Speak to him; rouse him; you may save him yet.
He's young; he hated war; how should he die
When cruel old campaigners win safe through?

The parallelism ("Speak to him; rouse him") makes this section feel urgent and desperate, as though it is suddenly the reader's responsibility to save the dying man. The polyptoton on the words "he" and "him" reminds the reader that the dying man is an individual—and really just a boy, who once had his own hopes and dreams for life.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "Silence and safety"
- **Lines 11-12:** "Water—calm, sliding green above the weir; / Water—a sky-lit alley for his boat,"
- **Line 16:** "Night,"
- **Line 18:** "Night."
- **Line 22:** "Rain"
- **Line 24:** "rain"
- **Line 25:** "rain"
- **Line 36:** "Speak to him; rouse him;," "him"
- **Line 37:** "He's," "he," "he"
- **Line 39:** "him"
- **Line 40:** "silence"
- **Line 41:** "Silence and safety"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

In the next-to-last stanza, the poem makes an important shift. So far, the speaker has functioned as an omniscient narrator, able to see into the dying soldier's interior state. Now, the speaker makes dramatic commands directly to the reader:

Speak to him; rouse him; you may save him yet.
He's young; he hated war; how should he die
When cruel old campaigners win safe through?

These lines beg the reader to save the young man, and culminate in the poem's one [rhetorical question](#): the speaker asks why the young man has to die, given that "he hated war" and had his whole life ahead of him. Millions like him are slaughtered, while those politicians and generals who send them to their death "win safe through"—that is, stay comfortably out of danger.

This question remains unanswered and unanswerable because the poem knows that this is just how things are: war is unjust, wasteful, tragic, and based on major imbalances of power. But by including this question, the poem doesn't just ask *why* this happens, but how those "cruel old campaigners" can possibly *allow* it to happen—and, perhaps, asks whether society in general should bear some responsibility for all this senseless

bloodshed.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 37-38:** "He's young; he hated war; how should he die / When cruel old campaigners win safe through?"

SIMILE

In this poem, [imagery](#), [metaphors](#), and [similes](#) fly thick and fast, evoking the dying man's state of mind. He doesn't have much of a grip on reality anymore, and the poem's dense figurative language reflects his dreamlike experience.

The poem uses three similes in total. The first two appear in the opening stanza:

He drowsed and was aware of silence heaped
Round him, unshaken as the steadfast walls;
Aqueous like floating rays of amber light,
Soaring and quivering in the wings of sleep.

Silence, initially, is a kind of fortress that keeps the dying man safe—or *seems* to. But there's also something claustrophobic about this simile, suggesting the man is trapped in his current dreamy state and doomed to die. Meanwhile, the second simile—"Aqueous like floating rays of amber light"—sounds undeniably pleasant, and evokes a womb-like environment.

After this stanza, the poem mostly uses pleasant imagery to make the approach of death seem calm and meditative. That is, until the poem's next and final simile:

He stirred, shifting his body; then the pain
Leaped like a prowling beast, and gripped and tore
His groping dreams with grinding claws and fangs.

Pain here is a primal, malevolent beast that wants to consume the dying man. And this pain, of course, is a direct result of the wound he sustained in the war. This ferocious pain could stand in for the war's appetite for young life more generally.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "unshaken as the steadfast walls"
- **Line 3:** "Aqueous like floating rays of amber light,"
- **Lines 28-30:** "then the pain / Leaped like a prowling beast, and gripped and tore / His groping dreams with grinding claws and fangs."

ASSONANCE

[Assonance](#), like [alliteration](#) and [consonance](#), intensifies the poem's [imagery](#), [metaphors](#), and [similes](#).

One particularly vivid example comes at the very end of the poem, which refuses to allow the young man's death to signal

any kind of peace or resolution. Instead, a familiar sound travels on the air:

Then, far away, the thudding of the guns.

These /uh/ sounds are heavy and frightening, marking the arrival—or, more accurately, *return*—of the gun sounds. Perhaps the poem is no longer set in the dying man's mind, and the reality of the situation returns. Or perhaps they are more metaphorical guns, signaling the endlessness of humanity's self-inflicted violence. Either way, the assonance make sure it's the guns—not any of the pleasant images that came before—that linger in the reader's ear at the end of the poem!

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "Soaring," "quivering in," "wings"
- **Line 11:** "green," "weir"
- **Line 14:** "drifting"
- **Line 15:** "dipped"
- **Line 16:** "with," "wind," "in"
- **Line 17:** "curtain," "curve"
- **Line 18:** "Night," "blind"
- **Line 25:** "sweeps"
- **Line 26:** "peace"
- **Line 29:** "Leaped," "beast"
- **Line 30:** "dreams"
- **Line 35:** "will," "live"
- **Line 39:** "replied"
- **Line 40:** "silence," "night"
- **Line 42:** "thudding," "guns"



VOCABULARY

Drowsed (Line 1) - Drifted in and out of sleep.

Heaped (Line 1) - Piled up.

Steadfast (Line 2) - Strong and sturdy.

Aqueous (Line 3) - Watery; as if seen through water.

Lipped (Line 6) - Lapped against.

Crimson (Line 9) - Deep red.

Opiate throb (Line 10) - The dying man's pulsating pain, experienced through a haze of painkilling drugs.

Weir (Line 11) - A small dam.

Hues (Line 14) - Shades, colors.

Gumming (Line 17) - Widening.

Wraiths (Line 19) - Faint ghosts.

Queer (Line 20) - Strange.

Blots (Line 20) - Smudges.

Scarlet (Line 20) - Bright red.

Pattering (Line 24) - Falling with a gentle tapping sound.

Prowling (Line 29) - Hunting.

Groping (Line 30) - Fumbling.

Rouse (Line 36) - Awaken.

Campaigners (Line 38) - Authorities in charge of the war, e.g. politicians and generals.



FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Death Bed" is a relatively long poem broken up into stanzas of varying length. Stanzas 1, 3, 4, and 5 are [sestets](#) (that is, stanzas of six lines), the second stanza has nine lines, and the last two stanzas have five and four lines respectively.

This erratic, unpredictable, and episodic form mirror the dying man's mind as he slips in and out of consciousness. His grip on reality is fleeting, and his dreams mingle with sensations from real life.

It's also worth noting that the sheer length of the poem creates tension by delaying the soldier's death. There are many points where it seems like he might have died (e.g., line 15) but it's not until line 33 that death, in [personified](#) form, actually arrives. The slow pace is intentionally tortuous, providing the reader (and dying man) with false comforts that soon give way to the horror of death.

METER

"The Death Bed" uses [iambic](#) pentameter—that is, lines of five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm. But the poem doesn't stick strictly to this rhythm. If it were metrically steady, the poem would probably feel too ordered, at odds with the dying man's wandering state of mind.

When it stays steady, the poem's iambic meter sometimes builds a sense of calm and reassurance. Here are lines 14 and 15, in which the soldier dreams of a day out in a rowboat:

And shak- | en hues | of sum- | mer: drift- | ing down,
He dipped | content- | ed oars, | and sighed, | and
slept.

These rhythms are meditative and gentle, mirroring the pulsing motion of the oars in the water—an image that might be based on the soldier's memories of better days. If the poem ended here, this would be a relatively blissful way to go!

But this metrical stability only builds a false sense of comfort that will soon be torn down. In stanza five, for instance, the dying man is suddenly gripped by horrible pain. The meter changes to mirror this moment:

He stirred, | shifting | his bod- | y; then | the pain
Leaped like | a prow- | ing beast, | and gripped | and
tore

Two [trochees](#)—the DUM-da feet of "Shifting" and "Leaped like"—make this section feel metrically uneven, as if even the meter were writhing in pain. The way "Leaped" brings the stress to the front of the line is especially shocking; it's as though the poem is jumping out at the reader.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Death Bed" doesn't have a [rhyme scheme](#), making this poem a good example of [blank verse](#): that is, it's built from unrhymed lines of [iambic](#) pentameter. (More on that in the Meter section.) The *lack* of ordered rhyme reflects the dying man's changing state of mind: he drifts from one dream or sensation to another in abrupt shifts, without "rhyme" or reason.



SPEAKER

"The Death Bed" features an unidentified omniscient narrator. The speaker is thus able to portray the dying man's thoughts, feelings, and sensations as though he can see inside his mind. This allows the poem to speak clearly about the dying man's consciousness in a way that wouldn't make sense from a first-person perspective. Through the speaker, the reader has access to things that the dying man otherwise wouldn't be able to articulate (e.g., the river dream in lines 11-15).

The poem maintains this approach until the penultimate stanza. Here, the speaker suddenly talks to the reader directly using urgent imperatives:

Light many lamps and gather round his bed.
Lend him your eyes, warm blood, and will to live.
Speak to him; rouse him; you may save him yet.

It's as though the poem feels the need to close the distance between the reader and the dying man. This poor young soldier can't speak, so the speaker has to speak for him, making for a dramatic and confrontational conclusion that cries out against the injustice of war.



SETTING

The poem uses two main settings, which work like layers of the dying man's own consciousness.

In the real world, the poem is set in a hospital for soldiers wounded in the First World War. It *seems* to be a windy, rainy night in the summer, but it's hard to say for sure.

That's because the poem also takes place within the wounded

soldier's own mind. The poem's [imagery](#) is dreamy, influenced by the opiates he's taken to numb his pain. In the ethereal first stanza, for instance, the soldier seems to drift through "floating rays of amber light."

In the second stanza, these two worlds—the real and the imagined—even seem to overlap. The dying man is made to drink water, which transforms into a calm, meditative picture of boating on a river (perhaps based on a memory).



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967) was one of the foremost poets of the First World War. Together with writers like his friends [Wilfred Owen](#) and Robert Graves, Sassoon aimed to convey the *realities* of war—its violence, psychological impacts, waste of life, and sheer senselessness. His unflinching style implicitly rejected the patriotic sentimentalism of war poems by writers like [Rupert Brooke](#) and Jessie Pope.

Sassoon, who served as a soldier himself, wrote a number of his early poems after he was wounded in action. During his convalescence at the Craiglockhart Hospital in Edinburgh, Scotland, he also met Wilfred Owen; the two were major influences on each other and became some of the best-known poets of their generation.

"The Death Bed" was published in Sassoon's 1917 collection, *The Old Huntsman*, which contained his first war poems. Wilfred Owen marveled at the collection and felt "The Death Bed" was the jewel in its crown.

Sassoon's poetry was emphatically anti-war. For instance, "[Base Details](#)," a poem published in 1918's *Counter-Attack*, takes aim at those "cruel old campaigners" mentioned in line 38 here. "The Death Bed," meanwhile, takes a more intimate and sorrowful look at the costs of warfare.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The First World War was once described as "the war to end all wars"—a statement that turned out, sadly, to be untrue. Rather, it was the beginning of modern warfare: the technological advances of World War I enabled unthinkable new levels of violence, disease, and death. Approximately 10 million military personnel were killed during the conflict, with millions more civilians perishing too. Countless young men died in circumstances just like those described in this poem.

World War I began in 1914, sparked by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Due to a complex network of alliances and resentments, this death had a rapid knock-on effect across Europe. Soon, Great Britain, France, and Russia were fighting against Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire.

The United States was drawn into the conflict after numerous submarine attacks on American merchant and passenger ships. After years of bloodshed, Germany eventually surrendered on November 11th, 1918.

Sassoon served extensively in the First World War and drew on these experiences for his poetry. During his service, Sassoon developed a reputation for his courage and daredevil acts of bravery, earning the nickname Mad Jack and the prestigious Military Cross medal (which he later threw into a river in protest).

Having seen the horrors of battle first hand, Sassoon became highly critical of those who allowed—and encouraged—the war to continue. In his own words, he argued that "no one ever, from henceforth [should] say one word in any way countenancing war [...] for its spiritual disasters far outweigh any of its advantages."



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [World War I Poetry](#) — Learn about a selection of the most significant poems from the First World War. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LI_2hxW5uAk)
- [Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen](#) — Watch a clip dramatizing the meeting between the war's two most important poets. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FuzRR3jVgSO>)
- [The Old Huntsman](#) — Explore the full collection in which "The Death Bed" was published. (<https://archive.org/details/oldhuntsmanother00sass>)
- [World War I In Color](#) — Watch a clip of director Peter Jackson discussing his recent WWI film, *They Shall Not Grow Old*. Though technology, Jackson brings old war footage to vivid life, restoring a sense of the soldiers as actual people. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZY7RQAX_03c)
- [Sassoon's Life and Work](#) — Watch a BBC panel show in which experts discuss Sassoon and his poetry. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LI_2hxW5uAk)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER SIEGFRIED SASSOON POEMS

- [Attack](#)
- [Base Details](#)
- [Suicide in the Trenches](#)



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