

First March



POEM TEXT

1 It was first marching, hardly we had settled yet
 2 To think of England, or escaped body pain—
 3 Flat country going leaves but small chance for
 4 The mind to escape to any resort but its vain
 5 Own circling greyness and stain.
 6 First halt, second halt, and then to spoiled country
 again.
 7 There were unknown kilometres to march, one must
 settle
 8 To play chess or talk home-talk or think as might
 happen.
 9 After three weeks of February frost few were in fettle,
 10 Barely frostbite the most of us had escaped.
 11 To move, then to go onward, at least to be moved.
 12 Myself had revived and then dulled down, it was I
 13 Who stared for body-ease at the grey sky
 14 And watched in grind of pain the monotony
 15 Of grit, road metal, slide underneath by.
 16 To get there being the one way not to die.
 17 Suddenly a road's turn brought the sweet unexpected
 18 Balm. Snowdrops bloomed in a ruined garden
 neglected;
 19 Roman the road as of Birdlip we were on the verge,
 20 And this west country thing so from chaos to emerge.
 21 One gracious touch the whole wilderness corrected.

watched the gravel and rubble of the road pass monotonously by. To get to where we were going was the only way to avoid death. But a sudden bend in the road brought me surprising, delightful comfort. Snowdrop flowers blossomed in a broken-down old garden. The road we were on the edge of, I realized, was a Roman road, just like the Roman road near a town close to my home in Gloucestershire. This garden, which reminded me so much of the familiar English west country, emerged out of chaos, and its beauty seemed to restore the whole chaotic landscape.



THEMES



THE HORRIBLE MONOTONY OF WAR

The poem is spoken by a soldier marching through a ruined stretch of countryside during World War I. The horror of this war isn't confined to bloodshed and bombs: the soldier is also subject to mind-numbing exhaustion, homesickness, and anxiety about his chances of survival. Later on in the poem, however, the speaker's suffering is eased by the loveliness of a small, ruined garden—though it's ultimately unclear whether this moment of beauty can truly compensate for the monotonous awfulness of warfare.

The "unknown kilometers" of the speaker's long march, on which his regiment trudges through seemingly endless "February frost," aren't just physically taxing: the soldier's suffering also comes from the intense monotony of the journey, which has no clear end. Because it is so nondescript and boring, "flat country leaves but small chance for / the mind to escape." In other words, the lack of beauty and variety in the soldier's grim surroundings don't provide him with much in the way of distraction. Instead, the soldier is left with the "circling greyness" of his own thoughts. The soldiers try to distract themselves with "chess" or talk of home, but nothing seems to take the edge off "the monotony / Of grit" that passes beneath their feet.

All this changes, however, when the regiment comes upon an abandoned garden along the road. At the sight of its blooming snowdrop flowers, the soldier feels reoriented and reinvigorated—a fact that speaks to the power and importance of natural beauty, and thus also emphasizes the comparative pain of the soldiers' dull, repetitive trek.

But in a later version of the poem, two additional lines undercut the optimistic sentiment that such beauty can "correct[]" the ruined countryside: "Words are only words and the snowdrops were such," the speaker says. As revelatory and powerful as the snowdrops may be, the speaker suggests that their comfort is



SUMMARY

It was the regiment's first march of the day, and so early that we hadn't had time to start feeling homesick or sore. The flat countryside that we were marching through was so dull that it didn't provide much of a distraction. Instead, our minds were left to their own gloomy, pointless spirals. We stopped once, then again, then returned to marching through the ruined countryside. With countless kilometers left to cover, one has to distract oneself by playing chess, talking about home, or thinking about what might happen in the future. After three weeks of cold, frosty February weather, few of us were in good shape. Most of us had barely escaped frostbite. To move, to march on, or at least to be driven on—this was all we could do. I myself pepped up for a little while, but then lost energy. I looked at the grey sky to distract myself from my tired, sore body and

fleeting and that they can't truly compensate for the pain of war.

Even without these extra lines, one thing remains clear: much of the suffering of World War I, the speaker reveals, lay in the drudgery *between* the horrors of the battlefields.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-21



NATURAL SPONTANEITY VS. HUMAN ORDER

"First March" contrasts rigid human order with the spontaneity of the natural world. As a soldier, the speaker's life is dominated by military rigor. But towards the end of the poem, a "neglected" garden briefly interrupts the harsh monotony of his regiment's routine. The garden's lovely, spontaneous freshness offers a "balm" for the soldiers' troubles. In this way, the poem suggests that the harsh order of the military might be both unnatural and harmful to the human soul.

The speaker's world is defined by rigidity and regularity. The speaker uses military language like "march," "first halt," and "second halt" to evoke the regiment's orderly progress as they trudge across a monotonous landscape. Though all this marching seems endless and directionless to the soldier, it's implicitly dictated by the commands of a superior. And the speaker and his fellow soldiers must unquestioningly move forward.

Amidst all this oppressive control comes the garden, which pops out around a bend in the road to surprise the speaker. Importantly, this is an overgrown and disorderly garden, full of wild "snowdrops"—a garden cared for only by nature itself. The snowdrops soothe the speaker, offering "unexpected" and spontaneous pleasure.

To the soldier, the garden's ungoverned life is a good thing. The garden lacks the rigid control that defines the military, perhaps reminding the speaker that there is more to life than human interference: the need for order can mess up the pure beauty of the natural world, but that beauty returns even after it has been suppressed. Not only is the garden a comfort, it "corrects" a countryside torn up by war.

And though the flowers seem to appear out of nowhere, they actually might offer an alternative kind of order. Unlike the monotonous harshness of the military, the flowers signal the steady rhythm of the seasons. After a long, painful winter, they are a welcome sign that spring is near. If only for a moment, human militaristic order gives way to something greater: the order of nature. The garden, in its evocation of springtime and rebirth, is a sign that the misery of the war might one day end.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-21



LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

*It was first marching, hardly we had settled yet
To think of England, or escaped body pain—*

"First March" begins with just that: the first march of the speaker's long day's work as a World War I soldier. As his regiment begins to move, the soldier tries to get into the swing of things, but he can't settle into a rhythm quite yet. He isn't able to conjure up a comforting fantasy of home, and he can't stop thinking about his aches and pains; he's already been on the road for quite some time, the reader suspects.

The [tone](#) of the poem seems direct, at first. Notice how short and simple the first words of the poem are: "It was first marching." And yet, the speaker's meaning is actually quite elusive. The "it" remains undefined—and the reader knows what a "march" is, but what is a "marching"? The language of the poem thus feels both familiar and strange, as if an ordinary sentence has been jumbled and broken.

The [caesura](#) in the first line only emphasizes that effect:

It was first marching, || hardly we had settled yet

This caesura, breaking the line into jerky pieces, suggests that this is not going to be a particularly smooth march. The caesura in the second line is even more jarring:

To think of England, || or escaped body pain—

"To think of England" and "escaped body pain" are very different ideas, pointing out the two (equally painful) sides of the speaker's life: longing for home, and longing to escape his immediate physical suffering.

And take another look at the language here. The speaker describes his pain as "body pain" which he swaps for the more common phrase "bodily pain." The poem is about a suffering soldier—so, appropriately enough, the language of the poem feels broken and beleaguered.

LINES 3-5

*Flat country going leaves but small chance for
The mind to escape to any resort but its vain
Own circling greyness and stain.*

In these next lines, the speaker describes the monotony of the landscape. He notes that the flat countryside dulls the mind, and can't distract him from the drudgery and misery of his long

trek. The mental suffering of this march, it seems, is at least equal to the physical suffering.

Though this poem is in [free verse](#) (that is, it doesn't use a set form or [rhyme scheme](#)) it does contain many rhymes. One set of rhymes, in lines 4-5, creates a [couplet](#):

The mind to escape to any resort but its vain
Own circling greyness and stain.

Notice how lines 4 and 5 also rhyme with lines 2 and 6. This irregular rhyming pattern evokes the speaker's whirling, scrambling mind: while the rhymes link disparate lines, as if groping for meaning, the poem refuses to settle into an orderly pattern.

Even the speaker's identity doesn't totally come clear here. Rather than describing his personal thoughts and feelings (or the shared feelings of his fellow soldiers) by saying "our" minds or "my" mind, he uses the more general and impersonal phrase "the mind." Perhaps this comes out of the speaker's loss of a clear sense of self. The boring, empty landscape and the long, terrible march are eroding his identity and energy, leading him into grim mental spirals.

LINES 6-8

*First halt, second halt, and then to spoiled country again.
There were unknown kilometres to march, one must settle
To play chess or talk home-talk or think as might happen.*

Line 6 follows the movement of the regiment, from "First halt" to "second halt"—that is, two breaks, described in military language that suggests just how, well, regimented the soldiers' movements are. The soldier's day is broken up by these "halts"; the stopping and starting of the march are the only markers of time that he has.

Lines 7-8 also toy with time. Gurney switches between present and past tense here. There "were unknown kilometres" to march (past tense), but one "must settle to play" or "talk" (present tense). It's as if time itself doesn't quite bend to militaristic order; there's something slippery and chaotic about the soldiers' experiences, no matter how strictly the officers try to impose order on them.

Just as the soldiers do not know exactly what time it is, they also seem not to know exactly where they are. The phrase "spoiled country" is particularly vague. As he marches, this soldier could be anywhere—though a reader who knows a little about World War I might assume that he is supposed to be somewhere in France, marching through parts of the country that have already been "ruined" by war.

In other words, everything in these lines feels disorienting and blurred. All the soldiers can do to distract themselves from the swirling misery of their day-to-day lives is "play chess," "talk home-talk," or "think as might happen." The last of these

options—spoken in dialect that suggests many of these soldiers come from rural England—essentially means "to think about what might happen." That sounds a lot less comforting than playing chess or talking about home: for a foot soldier in World War I, what "might happen" (and what probably would happen) was an ugly, violent death. The speaker doesn't seem to want to name that possibility directly.

LINES 9-10

*After three weeks of February frost few were in fettle,
Barely frostbite the most of us had escapen.*

Lines 9-10 at last give the poem a little more specific grounding in time: the soldier's regiment has been marching for "three weeks" of cold February weather at least. (Notice that this makes the poem's title into a [pun](#), too: this "First March" might actually be taking place on the first of March!) The bad weather has not been kind to the soldiers; when the speaker says "few were in fettle" he means that few of the soldiers were in good health.

The phrase "in fettle" is distinctly British. Here, and at other points in the poem, the speaker uses specifically British language to suggest how he connects with his fellow soldiers through a shared longing for home.

Take a look at the speaker's [alliteration](#) in line 9:

After three weeks of February frost few were in
fettle,

The proliferation of /f/ sounds here feels harsh as that "frost," mimicking the conditions this line describes. Readers might imagine the /f/ sounds as the chattering of teeth, or as rough gasps for breath.

All this cold and misery even seems to distort the speaker's sentence structure:

Barely frostbite the most of us had escapen.

The placement of the word "barely" at the start of the sentence might strike a reader as odd. It's as if the words in this line have been jumbled together and rearranged. The word "escapen," meanwhile, again suggests the soldiers' accents, reminding readers of just how far from their native English countryside these men are.

LINES 11-13

*To move, then to go onward, at least to be moved.
Myself had revived and then dulled down, it was I
Who stared for body-ease at the grey sky*

In line 11, the speaker pauses for a moment to sum up everything he's just described in one grim sentence:

To move, then to go onward, at least to be moved.

These words are once again both simple and disorienting. The gist here seems to be that all the speaker can do is press on: he has no choice but to "go onward." But look at the way the language evolves:

- The phrase "to move" is bold, brash, and clear.
- "To go onward" is a little vaguer and less forceful.
- And "to be moved" is entirely passive.

If, at the start of the line, the soldiers are boldly forging a path, by the end of the line they have become mere pawns, being "moved" around like the chess pieces they played with earlier. As the march continues, the men are beaten down and they lose their sense of self. The [polyptoton](#) that transforms "move" into "moved" shows just how degraded and helpless the soldiers have come to feel.

In line 12, however, the speaker claims his own identity for the first time, using the words "myself" and "I":

Myself had revived and then dulled down, it was I
Who stared for body-ease at the grey sky

To say "it was I" who looked to the sky for some kind of comfort might seem unnecessary in any other context: normally, one would probably just say "I stared at the sky." Here, though, it's as if the speaker is grasping desperately for a sense of self in the midst of the military's grinding, impersonal monotony.

LINES 14-16

*And watched in grind of pain the monotony
Of grit, road metal, slide underneath by.
To get there being the one way not to die.*

As the soldier marches through the countryside, the "monotony" of the countryside is all part of the "grind of pain" he must endure: not only does his body hurt, his mind aches with the awful grey emptiness of the landscape around him.

Take a look at his [asyndeton](#) here:

And watched in grind of pain the monotony
Of grit, road metal, slide underneath by.

The lack of conjunctions here makes the road feel like just one heap of broken rock after another—nothing so formal as a path! And the speaker's language here is passive: as the path "slides" by him, he looks down and sees himself moving, but feels alienated from his own body. The march has become an unthinking, miserable habit.

But he has to carry on, regardless: "to get there" is the "one way not to die." Note that the speaker doesn't exactly say where "there" is—but judging from these surroundings, the reader might have a hard time holding out much hope that it'll be any more pleasant than the march. Perhaps the soldier doesn't

even know where he's being marched to, but follows the path unthinkingly: his senses have been so dulled that he doesn't even know where he is.

LINES 17-18

*Suddenly a road's turn brought the sweet unexpected
Balm. Snowdrops bloomed in a ruined garden neglected;*

These lines mark a distinct shift in the poem and work almost like a [sonnet's](#) volta, or turning point. After all that grim monotony, something totally new happens here: a sudden vision of beauty stops the speaker in his tracks.

Take a look at the [enjambment](#) between lines 17 and 18:

Suddenly a road's turn brought the sweet
unexpected
Balm. Snowdrops bloomed in a ruined garden
neglected;

By cutting off the word "Balm" from the rest of the preceding line, the poem makes a sharp turn, just like the road the speaker is walking along. The reader, like the soldier, comes upon this "balm" unexpectedly. A whole garden of snowdrops—early flowers, some of the first harbingers of spring—is still growing, even though its surroundings are "ruined" and "neglected." The sight of them will make a huge difference to the speaker, as the following lines will show.

There is also a bit of wordplay here. The word "balm," read aloud, sounds a lot like a more expected wartime word: "bomb." Cleverly, Gurney substitutes the violence of "bomb" with the peaceful word "balm," which means a comfort or a salve. Perhaps the sight of these snowdrops—a vision of beauty in a terrible grey landscape—feels, to this soldier, almost as shocking as an explosion.

LINES 19-21

*Roman the road as of Birdlip we were on the verge,
And this west country thing so from chaos to emerge.
One gracious touch the whole wilderness corrected.*

The sight of this lovely, abandoned garden reminds the speaker of his own home. The road he is on, he realizes, is just like the old Roman road that runs near the Gloucester town of Birdlip. (You can still see [Roman roads](#) throughout Britain and Europe.) The garden, he remarks, is a "west country thing," something that takes him right back to his own origins in the southwest of England.

This neglected garden thus strikes him as a reminder of home, but also a reminder of hope. Those [symbolic](#) snowdrops manage to "correct" the whole "wilderness" around the soldiers, speaking of spring renewal and new life arising from "chaos." Nature and time seem, for a moment, as if they might be able to right everything that the human-made misery of warfare has ruined.

These last lines are often read as a vindication of beauty—a declaration that natural loveliness can be an answer to horrors. The "balm" of the garden soothes the soldier, reminds him of home, and "corrects" the spoiled landscape. But this kind of reading, some might contend, is too optimistic: the beauty of the garden cannot do much to help the suffering soldier. It is only a momentary distraction.

An alternate version of the poem offers more commentary on the limits of beauty's power. In the later [1922 version](#) of the poem (which also includes a few other differences), Gurney includes these two additional lines:

But words are only words and the snowdrops were
such
Then, as some Bach fugue wonder — or some Winter
Tale touch.

Here, the speaker calls into question the staying power of beauty, whether it's natural beauty or the beauty of art. By "Bach fugue," the speaker means a piece of music by the composer Johann Sebastian Bach. And by "Winter Tale," the speaker likely means to call to mind Shakespeare's play *The Winter's Tale*, in which a stone statue springs miraculously to life.

In other words, these extra lines might suggest that snowdrops and art alike can only do so much. They might live longer lives than people (the snowdrops returning every spring, the artworks outlasting their creators), but they can't actually do anything about the war. Even this poem itself, the speaker implies, is "only words"—and words can't take away suffering, not permanently.

- **Lines 17-21:** "Suddenly a road's turn brought the sweet unexpected / Balm. Snowdrops bloomed in a ruined garden neglected; / Roman the road as of Birdlip we were on the verge, / And this west country thing so from chaos to emerge. / One gracious touch the whole wilderness corrected."



POETIC DEVICES

CAESURA

The many [caesurae](#) in "First March" help to evoke the speaker's long march—and his moments of relief from that march. For instance, look at the halting, herky-jerky caesurae in line 6:

First halt, || second halt, || and then to spoiled
country again.

Here, commas evoke exactly the events the speaker is describing: the poem "halt[s]" where the soldiers do, and "settle[s]" in for a longer trudge afterward.

At the end of the poem, Gurney uses a more pronounced caesura, this time with a period:

Suddenly a road's turn brought the sweet
unexpected
Balm. || Snowdrops bloomed in a ruined garden
neglected;

The word "balm," which belongs to a sentence started on the previous line, is stranded at the beginning of this line. The enjambment, combined with the period on this line, brings the reader to an abrupt halt, just as in the garden stops the speaker in his tracks.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "marching, hardly"
- **Line 2:** "England, or"
- **Line 6:** "halt, second halt, and"
- **Line 7:** "march, one"
- **Line 11:** "move, then," "onward, at"
- **Line 12:** "down, it"
- **Line 15:** "grit, road metal, slide"
- **Line 18:** "Balm. Snowdrops"

ENJAMBMENT

This poem's many [enjambement](#) lines help to evoke the events the speaker describes.

As the soldier struggles to make sense of the grim world around him, the poem itself seems to be frantically struggling



SYMBOLS



THE GARDEN

The unexpected garden the speaker and his regiment encounter [symbolizes](#) hope, joy, and the rejuvenating power of nature.

The garden the speaker discovers at the end of the poem is overgrown, chaotic, and unruly, obviously abandoned for a long time. But despite the weather and the war, the garden persists. Its potent natural force cannot be beaten down.

With its blossoming snowdrops, the garden also heralds the arrival of spring. The fact that the garden is in bloom reminds the soldier that the war will end, and that there is the potential for life to continue and flourish after this period of immense suffering.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

for order and coherence. Many of the enjambments break lines in such strange places that it seems as if that struggle isn't always going so well.

Take, for example, lines 4 and 5:

The mind to escape to any resort but its **vain**
Own circling greyness and stain.

The line break between "vain" and "own" creates a strange pause in the natural flow of the sentence, as if the speaker is grasping for the right words. Appropriately enough, this pause allows the word "own" to "escape" the rest of the sentence, just as "the mind" tries to escape its own circular misery. This enjambment thus helps to conjure up the speaker's feeling of being horribly trapped in the "circling greyness" of his own thoughts.

And listen to the enjambment in lines 14-15:

And watched in grind of pain the **monotony**
Of grit, road metal, slide underneath by.

This enjambment also falls at an unconventional place in the sentence. Here, it sounds almost like a ragged gasp for breath, evoking that "grind of pain."

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "yet / To"
- **Lines 3-4:** "for / The"
- **Lines 4-5:** "vain / Own"
- **Lines 7-8:** "settle / To"
- **Lines 13-14:** "sky / And"
- **Lines 14-15:** "monotony / Of"
- **Lines 17-18:** "unexpected / Balm"

ASYNDETON

Throughout the poem, Gurney uses [asyndeton](#) to create a sense of chaos, desperation, and dogged persistence. Instead of linking phrases together with conjunctions, Gurney simply piles them up, bringing together different thoughts without explanation—an effect that evokes the speaker's state of mind, and suggests just how chaotic and meaningless the world looks to him.

At times, asyndeton creates a kind of collage of images:

Of grit, road metal, slide underneath by.

Here, the "grit" and "road metal" seem to pile up in heaps as the speaker trudges past, making the road feel more like a jumble of rubble than a clear path.

At other points in the poem, the speaker uses asyndeton to interrupt himself:

There were unknown kilometres to **march**, one must
settle
To play chess or talk home-talk or think as might
happen.

In the first of these two lines, the speaker suddenly shifts from talking about the journey ahead to talking about distractions. His language makes an about-face, as if he needs to cut his sentence short because it's just too painful to describe all that monotony.

Asyndeton's jerky, confused moment from one idea to the next also mimics the soldier's march—which feels less like a steady *one-two one-two* and more like a stumbling, desperate trudge.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "marching, hardly"
- **Line 7:** "march, one"
- **Line 11:** "To move, then to go onward, at least to be moved."
- **Line 12:** "Myself had revived and then dulled down, it was I"
- **Line 15:** "grit, road metal, slide underneath by."

ALLITERATION

There's not too much [alliteration](#) in "First March": strong sound patterning might make the speaker's [colloquial](#) language feel more elevated and musical than the poet intends. But a few alliterative moments help to evoke the speaker's experiences and surroundings through sound.

For instance, take a look at the repeated /f/ sounds in lines 9-10:

After three weeks of February frost few were in
fettle,
Barely frostbite the most of us had escapen.

All those fricative /f/ sounds help the reader to feel the bitter cold that plagues the unfortunate soldiers: those /f/s have a hissing, spitting quality that feels as shocking as stepping out into the "frost." The sounds are almost [onomatopoeic](#), mimicking chattering teeth or shivers.

There's a similarly subtle, evocative effect in lines 14-15:

And watched in **grind** of pain the monotony
Of **grit**, road metal, slide underneath by.

The growling /gr/ sounds here mimic both the outside world and the inner, making the "grit" of the road feel like part of the soldiers' agonizing daily "grind." These paired sounds make it clear that there's no relief to be found in either the landscape or the speaker's thoughts; to the unfortunate soldiers, the

whole world feels pretty gritty.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "February frost few," "fettle"
- **Line 10:** "frostbite"
- **Line 12:** "dulled down"
- **Line 14:** "grind"
- **Line 15:** "grit"
- **Line 17:** "Suddenly," "sweet"
- **Line 18:** "Snowdrops"
- **Line 19:** "Roman," "road"
- **Line 20:** "country," "chaos"

IMAGERY

Throughout the poem, there are two major flavors of [imagery](#). The imagery at the start of the poem is quite different from the imagery at the end, and the shift from one type of imagery to another marks a major change in the poem's tone.

The first type of imagery describes the soldiers' grey, monotonous march. The speaker describes his mind as a "circling greyness," as empty as the flat grey sky overhead. And the road below him is made from "grit, road metal"—a grim assortment of rubble and industrial materials. By repeating these colorless, ugly images, Gurney is able to show how the reader how completely boring and monotonous this journey feels. The soldiers' inner worlds have turned as flat and grey as the war-torn countryside.

But when the speaker comes across an abandoned garden in lines 17-18, his imagery takes a turn. The greyness seems to break as he sees white "snowdrops" blooming, and realizes that he's on the edge of an ancient "Roman" road—both images of beauty and endurance emerging from the "chaos" of war. The gentle little snowdrops remind the speaker both of his own "west country" home and of the hopeful message of spring: perhaps things won't be quite so horribly grey forever.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-5:** "Flat country going leaves but small chance for / The mind to escape to any resort but its vain / Own circling greyness and stain."
- **Lines 12-15:** "it was I / Who stared for body-ease at the grey sky / And watched in grind of pain the monotony / Of grit, road metal, slide underneath by."
- **Lines 18-21:** "Snowdrops bloomed in a ruined garden neglected; / Roman the road as of Birdlip we were on the verge, / And this west country thing so from chaos to emerge. / One gracious touch the whole wilderness corrected."

SIBILANCE

[Sibilance](#) gives the speaker's encounter with the snowdrops

some gentle music. Like [alliteration](#), sibilance can help readers to imagine the speaker's experiences with their mind's ears as well as their mind's eyes.

Notice how many words in this passage use /s/ sounds:

Suddenly a road's turn brought the sweet
unexpected
Balm. Snowdrops bloomed in a ruined garden
neglected;

All those /s/ sounds together, especially after the rough, growling sounds of "grit" and "frostbite" earlier in the poem, help to make this moment feel soft and gentle—and perhaps even to evoke an early spring breeze moving over the snowdrops.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 17:** "Suddenly," "sweet," "unexpected"
- **Line 18:** "Snowdrops"

REPETITION

Throughout, the poem uses [repetitions](#) to create a feeling of monotony and helplessness, evoking the soldiers' seemingly endless march.

For instance, take a look at the way the speaker describes his regiment's routine:

First **halt**, second **halt**, and then to spoiled country
again.

The abrupt [diacope](#) on the word "halt," alongside the [parallel structure](#) here, makes these words feel like an officer's barked commands, breaking into a long dreary day.

Repetitions also connect the speaker's inner life to the outside world. Both the landscape and the speaker's mindset are "grey," the only named color in the poem, suggesting that the monotony of military life has made the speaker feel as beaten down as his war-torn surroundings.

The [polyptoton](#) in line 11 has a similar effect:

To **move**, then to go onward, at least to be **moved**.

The transition from the active "move" to the passive "be moved" suggests there isn't much choice here. The speaker feels swept helplessly along by the momentum of the march, like a fallen leaf in a river current.

Every day in these soldiers' lives, this repetition suggests, feels more or less the same: a grim, grey trudge through a bleak landscape, at the mercy of the military machine.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** “greyness”
- **Line 6:** “First halt, second halt,”
- **Line 11:** “move,” “moved”
- **Line 13:** “grey”

PUN

A quiet [pun](#) gives this poem a flicker of hope, and strengthens the redemptive mood of the last few lines.

Early on, the speaker tells readers that:

After three weeks of February frost few were in fettle

If the soldiers have been marching all through February, the poem's title might well be a subtle pun: the "First March" of the title could refer, not just to the soldiers' "first marching" of the day, but to the first of March!

And March, of course, marks the very beginning of spring—the same season traditionally heralded by "snowdrops" like the ones the speaker delights in at the end of the poem. If it's March, sunlight, warmth, and new growth can't be all that far away.

By connecting the drudgery and "monotony" of a military march to the very first days of spring, this pun underlines the mood of the closing lines, in which the sight of a garden full of fresh blossoms makes the speaker feel as if the ruined countryside has been somehow "corrected." Even the grimmest march, the pun suggests, might end in a March of new life and new beauty. Spring, in this reading, isn't just an antidote to wintry cold and death: it grows right out of the middle of destruction.

Where Pun appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “It was first marching,”

**VOCABULARY**

First marching (Line 1) - The first marching is the regiment's first movement of the day. This is also a [pun](#). The speaker implies that February has just ended, and so “first march” can also mean the first day of the month of March. The change of the month suggests the changing of the seasons and the steady approach of spring.

Vain (Line 4) - Futile, useless.

Fettle (Line 9) - In good shape. If the soldiers are in fettle, they are in good physical condition and are uninjured.

Grit (Line 15) - Gravel, sand, stones.

Road metal (Line 15) - Road metal is crushed or broken stone used to make a road. Applying gravel to a road is often referred to as “road metalling.”

Snowdrops (Line 18) - A kind of white, bell-shaped spring flower.

Birdlip (Line 19) - A village in the Cotswold area of England. Birdlip is in Gloucestershire, the region where Ivor Gurney was born and where his regiment was from. When the poem says that the Roman road reminds the soldier of Birdlip, this implies that it reminds him of home, or somewhere near his home.

West country (Line 20) - The southwestern part of England. Includes the county of Gloucestershire, where Ivor Gurney's regiment was from, and where Gurney himself was born.

Gracious (Line 21) - Kind or comforting. The word “gracious” comes from the word “grace,” which has a religious connotation. “Grace” is the blessing or favor of God. When the speaker says that the garden has a “gracious touch” he implies a kind of spiritual revitalization.

**FORM, METER, & RHYME****FORM**

“First March” is a [free verse](#) poem, which means it doesn't use a particular poetic form, a regular [meter](#), or a predictable [rhyme scheme](#). Instead, it's built from a single 21-line stanza. Though free verse poetry wasn't unheard of in Gurney's time, most other British WWI soldier poets (like [Siegfried Sassoon](#) and [Wilfred Owen](#)) used more traditional forms. Gurney himself used more rigid formal structures in other poems.

Though the poem is composed of just one stanza, there is a distinct shift in subject matter in the last five lines of the poem, when the speaker and his regiment discover the garden. This moment works almost like the volta in a [sonnet](#)—the moment when a new idea or realization is introduced, changing the poem's [tone](#).

“First March” is also sometimes referred to as an ode. Odes are typically short lyric poems with no set rhyme scheme or meter, but with a musical quality. And Gurney, as a trained composer, surely had music in mind when he wrote this poem.

METER

Like all [free verse](#) poems, “First March” does not have a set [meter](#). But it does play with rhythms, line lengths, and sounds to create music and meaning.

For instance, take a look at the way lines 3-5 are shaped:

Flat country going leaves but small chance for
The mind to escape to any resort but its vain
Own circling greyness and stain.

Here, two long, wandering [enjambéd](#) lines come to an abrupt halt in the shorter, [end-stopped](#) line 5—just as the speaker's mind keeps coming back to its "own circling greyness." The rhythms of the lines mimic the mood of the poem.

RHYME SCHEME

"First March" does not have a set [rhyme scheme](#). However, almost every end word here has at least one rhyming partner. Take a look at this map of the rhymes:

ABCBBBDEDEFGGGGGIIJJI

That's a lot of rhyme for a poem without a strict rhyme scheme! The irregularity of the pattern here means that the poem never settles into predictability, keeping readers on their toes throughout.

The rhymes are also often meaningful. For instance, the last five lines of the poem, in which the speaker feels his heart lift at the sight of a beautiful, overgrown garden, use a harmonious pattern of rhymes, mirroring the speaker's sense that the "wilderness" is somehow "corrected" by this patch of natural beauty.



SPEAKER

The speaker of the poem is an unnamed British soldier from the West Country. Many readers thus see the speaker as a version of Ivor Gurney himself, who had a similar biography.

As a whole, Gurney's poems are very autobiographical. Gurney himself was from Gloucestershire in the West Country, and he was part of the Gloucestershire regiment, which saw combat on the Western Front during the First World War. "First March" is only one of the poems he wrote drawing on his wartime experiences.

Whether or not the reader interprets the speaker as Gurney, it's clear that he's a sensitive and beauty-loving soul—perhaps not the best fit for a life of grim military drudgery!—and that, like a lot of the young soldiers of World War I, he's terribly homesick.



SETTING

The poem takes place on a road somewhere in Europe during the first World War. If the poem is indeed based on Gurney's own time as a soldier, it is likely the poem is set in France, where many of World War I's bloodiest battles were fought.

But the landscape is essential anonymous: the speaker marches along a monotonous and seemingly endless road, all gravel and mud. He does not even know how many miles are left to march; before him are "unknown kilometres."

Though it is implied that the regiment is not in England presently, the garden that the speaker sees at the end of the

poem—which is on an old Roman road, much like a Roman road near his home in the West Country—makes him feel as if he were back in England, walking near his hometown. This poignant moment might hint at just how pointless this war is: enemy territory can look just like home.



CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Though not as well known as some of his contemporaries, Ivor Gurney (1890-1937) was one of the most prominent of the World War I poets. He is often compared to other British soldier poets such as [Siegfried Sassoon](#), Robert Graves, and [Wilfred Owen](#). All of these men saw active duty during the war and also wrote extensively about their wartime experiences.

Gurney was born in Gloucestershire, England and studied music at the Royal College of Music. But the onset of World War I cut short his academic work. Gurney enlisted as a soldier in the Gloucester regiment, and it was during his time on the front that he began to write poetry seriously. While Gurney received some degree of critical success after the publication of his first book, *Severn and Somme*, his struggles with mental illness, perhaps intensified by his wartime trauma, meant he never achieved the recognition that some of his contemporaries did.

Gurney wrote "First March" between 1920-1922, shortly before he was committed to a mental hospital. Gurney made changes to the poem throughout the years; the version referenced in this guide is an early one that was compiled into a book of Gurney's poetry. Readers can check out a later version of the poem, which includes some small changes and four additional lines, [here](#).

Gurney and his contemporaries were writing right before the beginnings of the modernist movement in poetry. Modernist poetry, associated with writers like [Ezra Pound](#) and [T.S. Eliot](#), was often wildly experimental in both its form and its subject matter. Gurney and the other War Poets, by contrast, tended to write in more traditional styles. That said, "First March" does share in some of the trends of modernist poetry, playing with sentence structure and unusual patterns of rhyme.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"First March" was written shortly after the end of the immensely destructive First World War, which lasted from 1914 to 1918. This war, which was also referred to as the "war to end all wars" or the Great War, unleashed unprecedented death and destruction across the globe. Life as a soldier on the European front was grim and dangerous, full of mud, blood, and deadly boredom. Being one such soldier was the defining event in Gurney's life. He takes war as his theme in the majority of his poems.

Like many of his contemporaries, Gurney suffered from what was then referred to as “shellshock” (now known as post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD). Gurney was exposed to mustard gas during the third battle of Ypres and was also wounded when he was serving as a machine gun runner. These traumatic experiences, combined with his already tenuous hold on his mental health, drastically affected him and led him to be institutionalized. Unfortunately, this was quite common for soldiers of the period. The effects of war, both material and immaterial, lasted long after peace was declared.

the poem. Notice the two added parenthetical lines and the couplet at the end, which close the poem on a much grimmer note. (<http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/items/show/8543>)

- [A Reading of the Poem](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=isoEvud0Ed8) – Listen to the poem read aloud. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=isoEvud0Ed8>)
- [Biography of Ivor Gurney](https://ivorgurney.co.uk/) – Visit the Ivor Gurney Society to learn more about the poet’s life and work. (<https://ivorgurney.co.uk/>)



MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- [More on Ivor Gurney](https://youtu.be/sPx1Xk-E0bY) – Watch a short BBC short documentary on Gurney’s life and work. (<https://youtu.be/sPx1Xk-E0bY>)
- [The War Poets](https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/9-poets-of-the-first-world-war) – Read about the World War I poets and their world. (<https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/9-poets-of-the-first-world-war>)
- [A Later Draft](#) – Take a look at Gurney’s later revision of



HOW TO CITE

MLA

Holahan, Oona. "First March." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 13 Sep 2021. Web. 30 Sep 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Holahan, Oona. "First March." LitCharts LLC, September 13, 2021. Retrieved September 30, 2021. <https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/ivor-gurney/first-march>.