The Next War

POEM TEXT

War's a joke for me and you,
Wile we know such dreams are true.
- Siegfried Sassoon

Out there, we've walked quite friendly up to Death;
Sat down and eaten with him, cool and bland,—
Pardoned his spilling mess-tins in our hand.
We've sniffed the green thick odour of his breath,—
Our eyes wept, but our courage didn't writhe.
He's spat at us with bullets and he's coughed
Shrapnel. We chorussed when he sang aloft;
We whistled while he shaved us with his scythe.

Oh, Death was never enemy of ours!
We laughed at him, we leagued with him, old chum.
No soldier's paid to kick against his powers.
We laughed, knowing that better men would come,
And greater wars: when each proud fighter brags
He wars on Death—for lives; not men—for flags.

SUMMARY

"The Next War" begins with an epigraph from Siegfried Sassoon's poem "A Letter Home." The speaker of "A Letter Home" irreverently declares that war is insignificant for the speaker and the reader, both of whom believe that their hopeful dreams of rebirth and regeneration will triumph over the bleakness of war.

The speaker, a nameless soldier, states that he and other soldiers have been intimate with a personified Death in war. In fact, the soldiers have even sat and eaten their meals with Death. Moreover, the soldiers treated Death's presence beside them as normal and unremarkable. The soldiers forgave Death when he spilled their containers of food into their hands. The soldiers have also been so physically close to Death as to smell his repulsive breath, which is green and thick like poison gas. The soldiers' eyes have watered at Death's bad breath, but they've remained unafraid of him. Death has also attacked the soldiers by expelling bullets and shrapnel through his body. Nevertheless, the soldiers continued to serve as a chorus for Death's song. The soldiers even whistled while Death, figured as the Grim Reaper, cut them down with a scythe.

Death, the speaker exclaims, was never the soldiers' real enemy. Indeed, the soldiers laughed at Death and were friendly allies with him. Countries, after all, do not pay their soldiers to fight against Death. The soldiers laughed as they knew that other soldiers, better than them, would continue to arrive on the battlefield of bigger, future wars. Some prideful soldiers may brag that they fight against Death in order to save more lives. In reality, soldiers are only fighting for national interests that have nothing to do with them.

THEMES

WAR AND DEATH

In "The Next War," a soldier describes his and his fellow soldiers' relationship to a personified Death. Death is a constant presence in the soldiers' lives, to the point that the soldiers treat Death like an "old chum"—a term that one might use to refer fondly to an old friend. Through this, the poem underscores the immense horror of war—in which something as terrible and fearsome as death is so common, so inescapable, that it becomes a familiar, intimate companion.

Death surrounds the solders in the poem—when they eat, rest, and, of course, when they enter the battlefield. Yet familiar though he may be, Death's remains rather repulsive and threatening throughout. Death is so physically close to the soldiers that they are even able to smell his breath, which has a disturbing "green thick odour." This evokes images of chemical warfare, specifically poison gas.

This sense of gross intimacy is further underscored by the image of Death "spilling mess-tins," spitting at the soldiers "with bullets," and "cough[ing] / Shrapnel." Despite seeming like a decrepit, sickly pal, however, the speaker insists that "Death was never enemy of ours," and that the soldiers would laugh and play with Death.

The poem's light-hearted tone creates a sense of irony meant to reflect how horrific and disturbing war really is. Indeed, the soldiers even "league" with Death. To "league" with someone is to become allies with them. The soldiers view Death as an ally on the same side of the war—which makes sense when considering that Death attacks the opposing army as well!

The transformation of Death into a friendly companion highlights the physical and psychological horrors of war for soldiers, who are forced into camaraderie with the most frightening "chum" of all.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

WAR AND PATRIOTISM

The poem's speaker, a nameless soldier, implicitly questions the purpose of war. Soldiers, the speaker observes, do not fight against death itself, because war is not some heroic act undertaken to save the lives of one's countrymen. Instead, the poem argues, war is fought "for flags." In other words, war is waged on behalf of countries, governments, and national pride—vague, non-human entities that have little to do with the soldiers dying (and killing) on their behalf.

Through this idea, the poem rejects notions of war as something noble or patriotic. It further suggests that the sacrifices war requires are made in vain, because war will not bring about peace or safety; rather, it will just lead to, as the title suggests, the "next war."

In order to make this point, the speaker first establishes war's immense cost: its death toll. Death is so omnipresent in the soldiers' lives that the speaker personifies it as capital-D Death, an intimate wartime friend. What's more, the soldiers don't fight *against* Death, but rather *alongside* him. To that end, the soldiers have "chorussed" when Death "sang." To "chorus" is to sing and perform together as a group. Consequently, when the soldiers "chorus," they are a supporting musical accompaniment to Death's song, enhancing Death's music.

Similarly, the soldiers have "whistled" even as Death cut them down "with his scythe." This is an allusion to the image of Death as the Grim Reaper, a hooded figure holding a type of handheld blade used to cut crops (which the Grim Reaper uses to cut down the living). A scythe is often described as making a whistling sound when swung through the air. The whistlling of the soldiers, therefore, mirrors the whistlling of Death's scythe, highlighting the similarities between Death and the soldiers. Both, the speaker suggests, cut down the living.

Soldiers are thus both victims and agents of death in war—an idea that helps puncture sanitized images of wartime glory and nobility by not letting the reader forget that soldiers are tasked with *killing other human beings*. As such, the soldiers are not "paid to kick against [Death's] powers." In other words, political leaders who pay soldiers to fight do not expect their soldiers to defeat death. Rather, political leaders expect their soldiers to kill enemy soldiers—or to die trying.

Political leaders and savvy soldiers, therefore, hold no illusions about the real purpose of war. Those who think otherwise seem foolish to the speaker, like "proud" braggarts who think they're saving lives and don't understand that they're actually just fighting on behalf of a hollow symbol of national interests (a.k.a. that "flag").

War also doesn't lead to lasting peace or resolution in the poem. Indeed, the speaker and his fellow soldiers just laugh at the absurd knowledge that no matter what they do, other men will fight more wars in the future. The soldiers' laughter is bleak and mocking, implying that the cycle of warfare is never-ending and pointless.

War, in the speaker's summation, is full of needless sacrifice, pointless death, and hollow causes. Political leaders might try to depict war as an act of patriotism and heroism. However, "The Next War" clearly refutes such idealization. The poem argues that wars, and therefore the soldiers who fight in them, do not save lives or provide resolutions to conflicts; rather, they only further a cycle of death.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 7-8
- Lines 9-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

BEFORE LINE 1

War's a joke for me and you,
Wile we know such dreams are true.
- Siegfried Sassoon

In 1917, Owen was sent to Craiglockhart War Hospital for shell shock (what would now be called posttraumatic stress disorder, or PTSD). There Owen encountered the poet Siegfried Sassoon. While they were both recuperating at the hospital, Owen often shared his poems with Sassoon, who was seven years Owen's senior. As a fellow soldier and poet, Sassoon became a friend and mentor figure to Owen, offering revisions of Owen's work and deeply influencing his poetic style.

"The Next War," written while Owen was at Craiglockhart, features the last two lines of Sassoon's poem, "A Letter Home," as an epigraph. Sassoon's poem, addressed to his friend and fellow poet Robert Graves, memorializes the death of a mutual friend who was killed in action. As the poem progresses, "A Letter Home" imagines their mutual friend's rebirth as a mythical figure.

"A Letter Home" has an irreverent attitude toward war. As the second to last line declares, war is "a joke" for Sassoon and Graves as they know their dreams of rebirth and regeneration will triumph over the darkness of war.

"The Next War" begins by borrowing this irreverent attitude toward war, specifically toward death. However, "A Letter Home" ends on a much more hopeful tone. Nevertheless, "A Letter Home" clearly influences "The Next War" in matters of tone and content. Both poems, ultimately, acknowledge the

terrible loses of life that war brings about.

LINE 1

Out there, we've walked quite friendly up to Death;

The first line of "The Next War" introduces the personification of death as capital-D Death, as well as the poem's ironic tone.

The poem opens with the speaker declaring that he and his fellow soldiers have "walked quite friendly up to Death" on the battlefield. The assonance of smooth and swift /w/ sounds in "we've" and "walked" mirrors the swift, unhesitating approach of the soldiers to Death. The speaker and his fellow soldiers are not only physically close to, but also emotionally intimate with Death.

Meanwhile, the image of the soldiers walking companionably and side-by-side with Death, a figure they should fear and revile, is surprising. This is an example of irony (specifically situational irony). One does not expect war to make soldiers feel *friendlier* to Death; rather, one expects that war will repel the soldiers even more from Death.

The speaker, a nameless soldier, refers to himself and other soldiers with the collective term of "we." In doing so, the speaker implies that these soldiers are unified in terms of their experiences with Death. Moreover, by not providing the poem's speaker with any identifying features such as a name or nationality, Owen implies that his speaker's experience is universal to other soldiers, no matter their nationality—and thus no matter the country they're fighting for.

The meter of the first line is also interesting. "The Next War" is a Petrarchan sonnet and, as such, is written in iambic pentameter—a meter made up of five iambs (poetic feet consisting of syllables in an unstressed-stressed pattern). Iambic meter closely represents natural speech patterns. This is fitting for the poem, as the poem is written as if delivered by the speaker in real-time, perhaps even as a response to Sassoon's poem.

LINES 2-3

Sat down and eaten with him, cool and bland,—
Pardoned his spilling mess-tins in our hand.

The speaker goes into more detail regarding the soldiers' relationship with Death. The soldiers, the speaker explains, have "Sat down and eaten with" Death. To share a meal with someone is an intimate act that can develop and strengthen emotional bonds. The fact that the soldiers have shared meals with Death thus implies just how close they are to Death.

The caesura created through the comma after "him" slows down line 2 and invites the reader to linger on the unexpected image of the soldiers eating with Death. The speaker further reveals that the soldiers were "cool and bland" in response to Death's presence—that is, that the soldiers were completely uninterested in Death's presence and found him unremarkable. This implies that this scene is nothing unusual or out of the ordinary. On the contrary, the soldiers have long grown accustomed to Death's presence by their sides. This fact underlies the psychological horror of war, which has so affected the soldiers that Death seems, perversely, like a close and unremarkable friend.

The act of eating with Death also serves as a metaphor for the act of killing. Death metaphorically feeds on the living; in other words, the living must die for Death to sustain his existence. Therefore, the soldiers, by eating with Death, also figuratively on the living by killing other enemy soldiers in order to survive.

In the third line, the speaker further describes the high degree of tolerance and friendliness the soldiers feel for Death. Even when Death spilled food out of the soldiers' "mess-tins," containers for cooking and eating out of, and onto their hands, the soldiers still "[p]ardoned" or forgave him. The soldiers, therefore, don't mind if he causes them trouble or creates messes. The soldiers and Death are, after all, close friends. This image might also be interpreted as referencing the way the horror of war invades even soldiers' mundane moments; think of suddenly dealing with gunfire while trying to eat in the trenches of WWI. They are never really or at ease.

The meter shifts slightly from the regular iambic pentameter established in the first line. While line 2 is written in iambic pentameter, line 3 includes slight variations in the meter:

Pardoned his spilling mess-tins in our hand.

A trochee (stressed-unstressed) opens this line. This disturbance in the poem's meter mirrors Death's act of spilling food and creating a disturbance in the regular routine of eating. The iambic meter of the line, however, resumes after the first iamb, signaling a return to the regular pattern. This too mirrors the content, as the soldiers are quick to forgive Death's mess and view his disturbance as common and expected.

LINES 4-5

We've sniffed the green thick odour of his breath,—
Our eyes wept, but our courage didn't writhe.

The speaker increases the intimacy between the soldiers and Death. In line 4, the speaker mentions smelling Death's repulsive breath, which is described as having a "green thick odour." Death's breath is clearly not pleasant! More specifically, the imagery of Death's breath as "green" and "thick" is an allusion to the poison gas used as a chemical weapon in WWI. Owen is specifically referencing chlorine gas, which produced greenish cloud when released upon the battlefield.

In line 5, the speaker describes the soldiers' responses to smelling Death's terrible breath. The soldiers' "eyes wept"—as indeed they would when coming into contact with highly toxic chlorine gas—"but [their] courage didn't writhe." Though the soldiers are physically repelled by Death's breath, they remain

steadfast. The assonance of drawn-out long /i/ sounds in "eyes" and "writhe" evoke the wails of those affected by poison gas, enhancing the imagery of the battlefield. Yet though the speaker and his fellow soldiers may have experienced horrific physical side effects upon exposure to poison gas, they remained emotionally unaffected.

The meter of line 5 also includes a variation in the regular iambic pentameter of the poem:

Our eyes wept, but our courage didn't writhe.

The second foot here is another trochee ("wept, but"). This variation in meter places emphasis on the physical toll Death's breath, or poison gas, causes the soldiers.

LINES 6-8

He's spat at us with bullets and he's coughed
Shrapnel. We chorussed when he sang aloft;
We whistled while he shaved us with his scythe.

"The Next War" is written in the form of a Petrarchan sonnet, which are traditionally composed of an octet (and eight-line stanza) followed by a sestet (a six-line stanza). In the last three lines of this octet, the speaker develops the poem's sense irony by further describing the seeming contradictions in the relationship between Death and the soldiers.

Death has "spat" at the soldiers with "bullets" and "coughed / Shrapnel" at them. This is a reference to the violence of the battlefield, where the soldiers would be shot at. Note how these physical weapons are expelled from Death's various bodily functions, such as spitting or coughing, adding to the image of Death as something grotesque and repulsive. The consonance of hissing /s/ sounds in ""spat," "us," and "bullets," enhances the imagery of these lines, as it mirrors the sound of Death spitting upon the soldiers. This sibilance returns in line 8, where it mimics the whistling sound of Death mowing the soldiers down "with his scythe."

The enjambment and the end of line 6 is the first in the poem; up until now, the lines have all been clearly end stopped. It's then followed by the abrupt pause created by the full stop caesura in line 7 after "Shrapnel." This pause evokes the finality in death that may be caused through Death's attacks with his bullets and shrapnel. Moreover, line 7 includes a variation in the iambic pentameter of the poem:

Shrapnel. We chorussed when he sang aloft;

The trochee at the beginning of the line stresses the significance of the shrapnel as a threat to the soldiers. Therefore, in meter and content, line 6-7 highlight the powers of Death. Death, the poem makes clear, is therefore not a regular human soldier. He has abilities that far outmatch the soldiers' abilities.

Nevertheless, despite Death's threatening presence, the soldiers remain friendly and even in sync with Death. They sing along as an accompanying chorus in Death's metaphorical song—a song of destruction and violence. Moreover, in line 8, the soldiers "whistled while [Death] shaved [them] with his scythe." The imagery of the scythe is an allusion to the Grim Reaper, a hooded figure wielding a scythe who traditionally represents Death. A scythe is a blade used for cutting down grains and typically makes a "whistl[ing]" sound as it is swings through the crops. In the Grim Reaper's hands, a scythe is used for cutting down human lives. The soldiers thus mirror the sounds of the scythe as the Death reaps human lives.

Therefore, as indicated by their "choruss[ing]" and "whist[ling]," the soldiers are not only friendly with Death but actively bolster his violence and destruction by causing death themselves. The soldiers do not fear death as one might expect they would; rather, ironically, they are close friends with him, helping him in his goals.

LINES 9-11

Oh, Death was never enemy of ours!
We laughed at him, we leagued with him, old chum.
No soldier's paid to kick against his powers.

In a Petrarchan sonnet, the transition between the octet and sestet often represents a shift or turn in the poem (called a "volta"). In the first three lines of the sestet here, the poem reiterates, and strengthens, its assertion that the soldiers are ironically friendly with Death. In line 9, the speaker exclaims emphatically that "Death was never enemy of [theirs]." They were never fighting against Death.

In the same vein, as the speaker explains in line 10, the soldiers "laughed at him" and "leagued with him, old chum." By laughing at death, the soldiers demonstrated that they feel no fear of Death. To be in "league" with another is to be friendly allies with them. Therefore, even more than not feeling any fear of Death, the soldiers were actively allies with Death. Moreover, the speaker refers to Death as an "old chum," a term of endearment among friends. The soldiers, then, clearly viewed Death as a comrade of theirs—almost like another soldier—on the battlefield.

The use of two caesuras created through commas in line 10 separate clearly each of the soldiers' actions toward Death. This delineation between the soldiers actions of "laugh[ing] at" Death to "league[ing] with him" to calling Death an "old chum" shows the development of greater intimacy in each of the acts over the course of the line. This development suggests a similar development of greater intimacy with Death over the course of the war.

In line 11, the speaker states that he knows nations and their political leaders do not pay their soldiers to "kick against [Death's] powers." The consonance of hard, firm /p/ sounds in "paid" and "powers" emphasizes the firmness of the speaker's

declaration. Soldiers are not expected to resist Death in two distinct ways. First, they are not expected to survive the war. That is, their lives are seen as expendable by their nations' leaders. Second, the soldiers are expected to cause further death by killing enemy soldiers in order to further their nations' causes during the war. Line 11, therefore, exposes the very little power that soldiers have in the greater political schemes of war.

LINES 12-14

> *We laughed, knowing that better men would come,*
> *And greater wars: when each proud fighter brags*
> *He wars on Death—for lives; not men—for flags.*

The last three lines of "The Next War" culminates in the speaker's ultimate statement of his cynicism. In line 12, the speaker describes the soldiers' laughter, typically an expression of joy and happiness. The soldiers laugh, the speaker explains, because they "know[] that better men would come." At first, the end of line 12 suggests a hopeful tone to this line. Perhaps these "better men," the poem briefly seems to suggest, will come to bring peace and an end to the war.

However, the beginning of line 12 quickly dispels any illusions of peace. These "better men" come not to bring peace but rather further "greater wars." Other, "better" soldiers will continue to arrive at the battlefield of future wars. War, therefore, can never result in peace; rather, war is an endless cycle of death and destruction. The soldiers' laughter is thus sardonic and represents their disillusionment with the war.

Moreover, the repetition, specifically anaphora, of the phrase "We laughed" in lines 10 and 12 emphasizes that, in both cases, the soldiers' laughter is not joyful or optimistic. The caesura in the middle of line 13 created through the colon slows down the pace of the line, emphasizing the soldiers' cynicism. The colon also indicates that the speaker will go on to further develop his disillusioned ideas about war.

Indeed, the speaker goes on to state that some "proud fighter[s] brag[]" that they fight wars "for lives." That is, some soldiers may brag that they are fighting Death on the battlefield, as they believe war is ultimately fought in some noble cause to save the lives of their fellow countrymen. However, in reality, the speaker states, soldiers are just fighting and creating death "for flags," which represent meaningless national interests. A flag is, after all, only an object and, as an object, not worth dying or killing for.

The use of caesuras in the last line punctuates each of the speaker's ideas, thereby highlighting and stressing their importance. Additionally, the assonance of /f/ sounds in "fighter," "for," and "flags" highlights the visual imagery of "flags," thereby emphasizing the speaker's derision toward these flags. War, the speaker makes clear, is not some noble endeavor. Rather, it is empty and meaningless.

SYMBOLS

FLAGS

A flag is a physical representation of a country and all that it stands for. A flag might be used to reaffirm a nation's power during times of peace or signal a nation's victory during times of war. As such, a flag often serves as a patriotic symbol. In "The Next War," however, a flag represents the *hollowness* of said patriotism and of the national interests used to justify war and death—interests that, the poem implies, have little concern for the soldiers actually on the ground and fighting on their behalf.

In the last two lines, the poem argues that fighting wars is not some noble act that saves the lives of one's fellow citizens. Rather, fighting wars on furthers the interests of governments and leaders far removed from those actually fighting. Flags are essentially just objects, the poem implies, making the loss done in their honor all the more striking. No flag, the poem argues, is worth the psychological toll or death caused by war.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 13-14:** "when each proud fighter brags / He wars on Death—for lives; not men—for flags."

POETIC DEVICES

ANAPHORA

"The Next War" uses anaphora (and parallelism) to highlight the irony of the soldiers' relationship to Death and, it follows, the speaker's cynicism about warfare. The speaker repeats "we" or "we've" at the start of clauses, followed by a verb, seven times in the poem.

In lines 1, 4, 7, and 8, this repetition directly describes actions the soldiers make over the course of the war in response to Death . Though these responses are at first unexpected, the poem's use of repetition ultimately creates a sense of inevitability regarding the soldiers' actions.

The speaker says that "we've walked," "We've sniffed," "We chorussed," and "We whistled" in response to Death's presence. Rather than turn away from Death's bad breath, the soldiers "sniff" it instead. Rather than disrupt Death's song, the soldiers bolster his voice with their own. Rather than run away from Death's scythe as he cuts them down, the soldiers choose to whistle blithely instead. Again, this repetition highlights the soldiers' ironic response to Death, and builds the reader's expectation that no matter what Death does, the soldiers will respond positively as a group—a response that underscores the horror of war.

Lines 10 and 12 contain another use of anaphora in the repetition of the phrase "We laughed." In line 10, the soldiers laugh at Death, an act that highlights the psychological impact of war. In line 12, the soldiers laugh at the concept of war itself, as they know that more soldiers will continue to arrive to fight on the battlefields of greater, future wars. The war they are currently fighting, therefore, is pointless and meaningless. This repetition emphasizes that their laughter is not joyful or optimistic. Rather, in each case, the soldiers' laughter represents their horror, trauma, and hopelessness.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "we've walked"
- **Line 4:** "We've sniffed"
- **Line 7:** "We," " chorussed"
- **Line 8:** "We," " whistled"
- **Line 10:** "We laughed," "we," " leagued"
- **Line 12:** "We laughed"

PERSONIFICATION

Understanding personification is essential to understanding the poem. The speaker uses personification in order to emphasize the emotional and physical intimacy between the soldiers and death, which is personified in the very first line as a capital-D Death figure. Personification allows Owen to treat Death like another soldier and a familiar companion. By highlighting this close relationship, Owen impresses upon the reader the psychological trauma of the soldiers and the horrors of war.

The soldiers have "walked quite friendly up to Death," an image that portrays death as a physical body on the battlefield. Walking close to Death makes it seem as if Death were a comrade, perhaps even a friendly fellow soldier. In the next three lines, Death not only shares a meal with the soldiers, but also stands so physically close that the soldiers can smell his repulsive "breath." The personification of Death highlights the constant threat of dying that the soldiers face.

Lines 6-8 continue this personification, depicting Death as a grotesque figure that "spat" at the soldiers with "bullets" and "coughed" "[s]hrapnel." This is a figurative way of depicting the violence of gunfire during war, and the poem's language makes such violence feel all the more immediate and threatening for the reader. Death also cuts the soldiers with his "scythe," a long blade and an allusion to the Grim Reaper.

Yet despite Death's physical attacks, the soldiers remain, ironically, friendly with him. Indeed, in the soldiers have even "leagued," or fought, with Death and refer to him as their "old chum." Treating Death like a person highlights war's psychological effect on the soldiers. On the battlefield, the poem makes clear, dying is no longer an abstraction, but rather a reality so constant and inescapable that Death has a physical presence. Moreover, this presence is so constant and familiar that Death becomes an old friend.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 6-8
- Lines 9-10
- Line 11
- Line 14

CAESURA

Caesuras appear throughout "The Next War." The poem uses caesura to slow down the rhythm of various lines, play with the reader's expectations, and to develop and emphasize particular ideas.

In the first line, the speaker describes walking up "quite friendly" to a personified Death on the battlefield. The caesura created through the comma after the phrase "Out there" slows down the reading of the line. This is evocative of the additional time it would take for the soldiers to catch up to Death and walk beside him.

Caesura can also be used to subvert the reader's expectations of the poem. In line 2, for example, the speaker describes sharing a meal with a personified Death. The reader might reasonably expect the soldiers to be terrified of eating with Death. Indeed, the caesura created by the pause in line 2 provides the reader with time to form this conclusion. Surprisingly, however, the soldiers are "cool and bland" when eating with Death. The soldiers treat Death's presence as unremarkable.

Similarly, the caesura in line 5 slows down the reading of the line, thereby allowing the reader to form expectations that are soon subverted. In line 5, the soldiers' eyes water in response to Death's foul green breath (which is an allusion to the poison chlorine gas used in WWI). The reader might expect the soldiers' fear to increase upon being assaulted with poison gas. However, what comes after the caesura subverts this expectation. Instead of being filled with fear, the soldiers' courage doesn't "writhe"—that is, it remains sure and steady.

The poem also uses caesura in order to develop and highlight particular ideas. In the last three lines, the speaker expresses his cynicism and disillusionment with war. The speaker describes the soldiers laughing as they know that, in the future, more, "better" soldiers will arrive at the battlefield of "greater wars." In the middle of line 13, the caesura created by the colon allows the speaker to develop upon this idea of the meaningless cycle of war. Indeed, the speaker goes on to declare that soldiers do not actually fight wars in order to nobly save the lives of the countrymen. Rather, soldiers fight wars "for flags"—that is, for hollow patriotism and national interests that have little to do with the fighters on the ground. The three

caesuras slow down these final two lines and emphasize their emphatic tone.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "there, we've"
- **Line 2:** "him, cool"
- **Line 5:** "wept, but"
- **Line 7:** "Shrapnel. We"
- **Line 9:** "Oh, Death"
- **Line 10:** "him, we," "him, old"
- **Line 12:** "laughed, knowing"
- **Line 13:** "wars: when"
- **Line 14:** "Death—for lives; not men—for"

ENJAMBMENT

Most of the poem is strongly end-stopped, adding to its measured, level-headed tone. Enjambment occurs in just two places in "The Next War"—at the ends of lines 6 and 13. The poem uses enjambment in order to evoke the experience within the lines and place emphasis on particular words.

In lines 6-7, the speaker describes a personified Death's various attacks on the soldiers. Death, the speaker observes, has "spat" at them with "bullets" and "coughed / Shrapnel." Shrapnel refers to deadly artillery made up of many smaller fragments. The enjambment that breaks up the line evokes the fragmentary nature of shrapnel.

Enjambment can also place emphasis on particular words and ideas. The last two lines of the poem culminate in the speaker's ultimate statement of his cynicism toward war. Some "proud" soldiers, the speaker observes, may "brag" that they fight Death on the battlefield in order save the lives of their countrymen. However, in reality, soldiers are only fighting and killing other men "for flag," hollow symbols of patriotism and disconnected national interests. The enjambment at the end of line 13 places emphasis on the word "brags," as it is the last word in the line. To brag is to boast pridefully about a subject in order to make oneself appear better to others. The soldiers' act of bragging draws parallels to the act of nations bragging about the nobility of their wars. Both brags, in reality, conceal a grim reality (namely, that war is pointless and meaningless, in the speaker's mind). Enjambment, therefore, stresses this unpleasant reality of war and the larger thematic ideas of the poem.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-7:** "coughed / Shrapnel."
- **Lines 13-14:** "brags / He"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration appears frequently throughout "The Next War." The poem uses alliteration to draw connections between words and also to evoke the speaker's experiences at war.

In the first line, the speaker, a nameless soldier, describes himself and his fellow soldiers "walk[ing] quite friendly up to Death." The soldiers do not hesitate in approaching a personified Death, suggesting that Death is a familiar and friendly presence on the battlefield. The alliteration of swift /w/ sounds in "we've" and "walked" mirrors the swift unhesitating approach of the soldiers to Death.

At the end of the octet, the soldiers even appear cheerful when facing Death. The soldiers "whistled while [Death] shaved [them] with his scythe." Whistling is usually a sign of someone feeling carefree or playful. The act of whistling when confronted by Death is thus an unusual choice, to say the least! The whistling /w/ sounds in "we" "whistled," "while," and "with," combined with the sibilance of this line, mirrors the whistling sounds of the soldiers.

In line 10, the shared /l/ sounds of "laughed" and "leagued" draw repeated attention to the soldiers' friendly relationship with Death. The alliteration in line 11 again reflects the soldiers' relationship with Death. The speaker asserts that soldiers are not "paid to kick against [Death's] powers." The popping, firm /p/ sounds in "paid" and "powers" suggest the firmness of the speaker's assertions and the unrelenting reality of Death's various "powers." Death cannot be negotiated with or cheated, and the sounds of the poem in this moment emphasizes the futility in fighting against Death during war.

In the last line of the poem, the speaker declares that soldiers do not fight against death in order to save the lives of their countrymen; rather, soldiers foolishly fight other men only "for flags." The assonance of /f/ sounds in "fighter," "for," and "flags" links the soldiers to the—in the eyes of the poem, hollow—symbol they fight for.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "we've," "walked"
- **Line 7:** "Shrapnel," "We," "when," "sang"
- **Line 8:** "We," "whistled," "while," "shaved," "with," "scythe"
- **Line 10:** "laughed," "leagued"
- **Line 11:** "paid," "powers"
- **Line 12:** "We," "would"
- **Line 13:** "wars," "when," "fighter"
- **Line 14:** "for," "for," "flags"

CONSONANCE

As with alliteration, consonance occurs abundantly throughout "The Next War." The poem uses consonance to draw connections between words and ideas, and also to evoke the events being described in the poem through sound.

In the second line, the speaker describes sitting down to eat with a personified Death. Contrary to expectations, the soldiers do not react negatively to Death's presence. Instead, the

soldiers are "cool" and "bland," words implying that they view Death's presence as commonplace and unremarkable. The consonance of smooth /l/ sounds in "cool" and "bland" evokes the smooth countenance of the soldiers and their unruffled demeanor.

Similarly, in the following line, the consonance also mirrors the speaker's experiences. In line 3, the speaker and his fellow soldiers forgive Death easily even when he "spill[s]" food out of their "mess-tins," containers for eating from, and onto their hands. The consonance of slippery /s/ sounds in "spilling" and "mess-tins" mimic the act of food slipping out of "mess-tins." The consonance, therefore, enhances the visual image here.

The consonance in lines 6 is also evocative of the experiences described in the line. In line 6, the speaker recalls Death's various attacks on the soldiers. Death has, for example, "spat" "bullets" at the soldiers. The consonance of /s/ and /t/ sounds in "spat at," "us," and "bullets" evokes this spitting sound.

Consonance can also draw attention to particular phrases and ideas. In the first line of the sestet, for example, the speaker declares that "Death was never enemy" of the soldiers. This statement summarizes the overarching irony of the poem. Although the soldiers should fear and be repelled by Death, they view him as a friend. The soldiers' mentality reveals the psychological horrors of war; on the battlefield, death is such a constant and familiar presence that it transforms into a friendly figure. The consonance of firm /n/ sounds in "never" and "enemy" emphasize the soldiers' mentality toward Death. War has irrevocably traumatized and changed the soldiers.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "we've walked," "friendly," "Death"
- **Line 2:** "down and," "cool," "and," "bland"
- **Line 3:** "Pardoned," "spilling mess-tins," " in," "hand"
- **Line 6:** "spat at," " us," "bullets"
- **Line 7:** "Shrapnel. We chorussed when," "sang," "aloft"
- **Line 8:** "We whistled while," "shaved," " us with," "scythe"
- **Line 9:** "never enemy"
- **Line 10:** "laughed," "him," "leagued," "him," "chum"
- **Line 11:** "paid," "powers"
- **Line 12:** "laughed"
- **Line 13:** "wars," "when," "fighter brags"
- **Line 14:** "for lives," " not men—for flags"

ASSONANCE

Assonance occurs abundantly throughout "The Next War." The poem assonance to draw attention to certain ideas or phrases and to sonically evoke the events and images being described in the poem. Take the many short /i/ sounds of "his spilling mess-tins in" in line 3; the assonance speeds up the line to that point that readers may almost trip over the words—subtly reflecting the way death spills those mess-tins.

Assonance continues in the next lines with the long /i/ and short /eh/ sounds:

> ... breath,—
> Our eyes wept, but our courage didn't writhe.

The shared /eh/ of "breath" and "wept" connects the soldiers' pain to Death's "breath" (which is itself an allusion to the poison chlorine gas used in WWI). The shared /i/ sounds in "eyes" and "writhe," meanwhile, evoke the cries of those feeling the effects of the poison gas.

In line 9, assonance of the short /eh/ sound appears again, this time linking "Death" to "never enemy"—underscoring the idea that the soldiers aren't fighting against Death, but rather alongside him. In the next line, the mixture of assonance, alliteration, and consonance makes the poem feel almost like a nursery rhyme:

> We laughed at him, we leagued with him ...

Note the shared long /ee/, /ah/, and short /i/ sounds, plus the shared /l/, /w/, and /m/ sounds. The poem uses parallelism and anaphora here as well, created two extremely similar phrases on either side of the comma with the same bouncy rhythm. The irony, of course, is that the speaker is using this light-hearted, sing-song tone to talk about being friends with Death.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "his," "spilling," "tins," "in"
- **Line 4:** "We've," "sniffed," "green," "thick," "his," "breath"
- **Line 5:** "eyes," "wept," "writhe"
- **Line 6:** "spat," "at"
- **Line 8:** "We," "whistled," "while," "he," "with," "his," "scythe"
- **Line 9:** "Death," "never," "enemy"
- **Line 10:** "We," "laughed," "at," "him," "we," "leagued," "with," "him"
- **Line 11:** "No," "soldier's," "kick," "his"
- **Line 12:** "better," "men"
- **Line 14:** "on," "Death," "not," "men"

ALLUSION

Allusions appear in three instances in "The Next War"—in lines 3, 4, and 8.

In the first three lines, the speaker describes the soldiers' intimate and friendly relationship with a personified Death. The soldiers even, the speaker acknowledges, eat their meals with Death. In line 3, the soldiers forgive Death for spilling food out of mess-tins, standard issue containers for eating, onto the soldiers' hands. This allusion to mess-tins does two things. First, it emphasizes the omnipresence of Death during war, which invades the soldiers space even when they're doing

something mundane like eating. The mention of "spilling mess-tins" also subtly evokes the spilling of blood on the battlefield. The particular focus on the soldiers' "hands," too, points to the soldiers' culpability in causing this bloodshed by fighting other soldiers (and, as such, alongside Death).

The next line an even more specific allusion to the horrors of WWI. In line 4, the soldiers have "sniffed the green thick odour of [Death's] breath." This is an allusion to the chemical weapons of WWI, and specifically to the use of chlorine gas—which appeared as a greenish cloud when released.

In the last line of the octet, the speaker says that Death has "shaved [the soldiers] with his scythe." This is an allusion to the Grim Reaper, a hooded incarnation of death in folklore and myth. The Grim Reaper is usually depicted as wielding a scythe, a bladed tool often used to cut down crops and grains. The Grim Reaper uses to cut down human lives. The personified Death in "The Next War," the speaker makes clear here, is not a protective figure that brings peace, but rather an ominous and threatening figure bent on "reaping" human lives.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "his spilling mess-tins"
- **Line 4:** "the green thick odour of his breath"
- **Line 8:** "he shaved us with his scythe."

IRONY

The poem is ironic because it argues that the soldiers' exposure to the horror and violence of war actually makes them *friendlier* with death, something typically deemed terrifying; fighting to supposedly end violence and protect other people actually makes them *more* comfortable with the presence of violence. The soldiers aren't actually fighting *against* death but *alongside* it, because they, too, are supposed to kill enemy soldiers. The poem's irony thus reinforces its message that war is not glorious and noble, but rather horrific, traumatic, and meaningless.

Soldiers on the battlefield are constantly exposed to death. War, after all, often progresses with great cost to human lives. One might thus naturally expect soldiers in war to fear death. However, the poem turns this notion on its head by saying that the soldiers are "quite friendly" with a personified "Death." This is meant to illustrate just how omnipresent Death is for the soldiers, and also how this omnipresence has led the soldiers to feel an affection for, rather than a repulsion towards, Death.

Indeed, in line 2, the soldiers even share meals with Death. Moreover, they stand so close to Death as to "sniff[] the green thick odour of his breath." Despite Death's various attacks on the soldiers with "bullets" and "Shrapnel," the soldiers have sung along with him and "whistled" as Death wielded his scythe.

It's clear that the soldiers do not consider Death their "enemy." Instead, the soldiers "leagued with" Death. To be in league with another is to be allied with them. Therefore, the soldiers consider themselves as being on the same side as Death—which makes sense when considering that they are supposed to be killing soldiers on the other side of the war. The soldiers go so far as to view Death as an "old chum," a term of endearment for an old friend. Death is such a constant presence in war, that he seems a friendly companion to the soldiers rather than a figure to be feared. The poem thus uses irony to reveal the shocking psychological effects of war upon the soldiers.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-10
- Lines 11-14

VOCABULARY

Bland (Line 2) - Not expressing strong emotions. The soldiers do not show any strong fear or revulsion when sitting down and eating with Death. Rather, they treat his presence as unremarkable.

Mess-tins (Line 3) - A portable container that was supplied to soldiers for cooking and eating out of.

Odour (Line 4) - The British English spelling of "odor," which is a distinctive, typically unpleasant, scent. Here, the soldiers smell Death's particularly revolting bad breath.

Writhe (Line 5) - To flounder or struggle.

Shrapnel (Line 7) - Fragments of a bomb or shell that has exploded.

Chorussed (Line 7) - Singing along with a larger group that may serve as an accompaniment to a featured performer. The soldiers sing together as an accompaniment to Death's sole voice.

Scythe (Line 8) - A blade typically used to cut wheat or grass. Death has often been represented as the Grim Reaper, a figure who wields a scythe that cuts down human life.

Leagued (Line 10) - To be in league or allies with. The soldiers are friendly allies with Death.

Old Chum (Line 10) - A term of endearment for an old friend. The soldiers make clear their intimacy with Death by using this friendly term to refer to him.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Next War" is a sonnet. It actually combines two different

types of sonnets. The first half of the poem is a Petrarchan sonnet, while the second half looks more like a Shakespearean sonnet. Both types are composed of 14 lines. But in a Petrarchan sonnet, the poem is divided into an eight-line octave followed by a six-line sestet. That octave itself is made up of two quatrains (four-line stanzas, here with ABBA rhyme schemes), and the sestet is made of two tercets (a.k.a. three-line stanzas). A Shakespearean sonnet, on the other hand, consists of three quatrains (with ABAB rhyme schemes, slightly different!) followed by a rhyming couplet.

This poem does have an octave made up of two quatrains and a seset. The octave follows the rules of a Petrarchan sonnet—it has two quatrains in the expected rhyme scheme—but the sestet here actually looks a lot more like a Shakespearean sonnet. Lines 9-12 are another quatrain, rather than the expected tercet, and have the ABAB rhyme scheme of the Shakespearean sonnet. Also like a Shakespearean sonnet, the poem ends in a final rhyming couplet. Owen thus uses a traditional form but puts a twist on it, reflecting his subversion of wartime patriotism. Mapped out, the form of the poem is as follows:

- Octet
  - Quatrain
  - Quatrain
- Sestet
  - Quatrain
  - Couplet

Traditionally, a sonnet establishes the poem's problem in the octet. The sestet then essentially responds to or answers the octet. In this poem, the octet establishes Death's omnipresence during war. The seset comments on this relationship by insisting that Death isn't actually the soldiers' enemy; they don't fight against Death, and as such aren't actually fighting to save lives. Instead, the final line asserts, fight "for flags"—that is, for symbols of national interests that don't have much to do with the reality on the ground.

METER

"The Next War" is written in the form of a sonnet. As such, it follows the traditional meter of a sonnet: iambic pentameter. Each line is made up of five iambs, poetic feet with a da-DUM rhythm. Take line 8:

> We whist- | led while | he shaved | us with | his scythe.

The speaker of "The Next War" is a nameless soldier who often expresses himself using casual terms ("old chum") and slang ("kick against"). The use of iambic pentameter is a fitting choice for the poem, as iambic meter closely resembles the rhythms of natural speech.

The meter remains fairly regular throughout the poem, suggesting the speaker's calm and collected demeanor. There are, however, moments of variation in the meter. Take, for example, line 3:

> Pardoned | his spil- | ling mess- | tins in | our hand.

In this line, the soldiers forgive Death for spilling food. The line begins with a trochee (stressed-unstressed, DUM-da) rather than an iamb. This unexpected shift in meter mirrors the act of Death spilling food and thus disturbing the regularity of mealtime. Nevertheless, the meter quickly resumes its iambic meter, evoking the swift forgiveness of the soldiers and resumption of normalcy in their mealtime. The soldiers are so used to Death's various disturbances and attacks, that they view them as minor.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Next War" combines the Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnet forms. The first eight lines, a.k.a. the octave, follow the rhyme scheme of a Petrarchan sonnet, while the final six lines follow the rhyme scheme of a Shakespearean sonnet. Altogether, the rhyme scheme looks like this:

ABBACDDC EFEFGG

This transition between forms is interesting. At first, the poem seems to be playing along with the "rules," staying in line with an established form. The content, too, doesn't seem all that provocative at first, adhering as it does to traditional notions of soldiers' bravery in war and their fearlessness in the face of death. However, "The Next War" ultimately questions traditional notions of the nobility of war and the greatness of patriotism. The unorthodox mixture of rhyme schemes mirrors the unorthodox, challenging tone of the poem.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "The Next War" is a nameless soldier. It's possible that Owen, who fought (and died) in WWI, is the speaker himself. However, this is by no means definite. Indeed, Owen purposefully does not provide his speaker with any identifying features, such as a name or nationality. Moreover, the speaker refers to himself and his fellow soldiers with the collective "we." The soldier views his experience of war as a *collective* experience. The lack of specificity suggests that the speaker could be *any* soldier who has ever fought in war and, consequently, that the speaker's experience of war is universal.

The speaker and his fellow soldiers view Death as a close and intimate friend, suggesting just how deeply traumatized they've been by their wartime experiences. They are essentially numb to the constant presence of Death. The speaker and his fellow soldiers even assist Death and mirror his actions by causing

more death. The speaker knows that Death is not the enemy and admits the futility of fighting against Death.

The speaker also openly challenges traditional ideas of the nobility of war and apparently holds no hope that war will cease existing. Rather, he believes that the cycle of warfare will continue, and that the "next war" will come soon enough.

SETTING

The poem takes place during a war, though which one is never specified. The allusions to chlorine gas and mess-tins suggest that the setting is specifically WWI, which Owen himself fought in. The mention of bullets and shrapnel further hint that this at least a war of the modern era.

That said, the poem never reveals more specifics about where or when this war is being fought, and it never even says who the speaker fights for. As such, this war can be understood as representative of past, present, and future wars. War in general, the poem implies, is filled with horror and death.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Wilfred Owen wrote "The Next War" in 1917, when he was being treated for shell shock at Craiglockhart War Hospital. It was also at this hospital that Owen befriended the older soldier and poet Siegfried Sassoon, who soon become a mentor figure to Owen. Much of Owen's earlier work reflects Sassoon's stylistic evidence, as Sassoon frequently provided his advice and guidance on Owen's drafts.

Like many of Owen's other poems written during this period, "The Next War" confronts the realities that Owen personally experienced as a soldier in WWI, as well as his cynicism regarding warfare and the politics of the time. Indeed, many of the other poets during this time, including Sassoon, Robert Graves, and John McRae, also concerned themselves with the subject of war and sought to dismantle overly romantic and idealistic visions of warfare.

Owen often questioned traditional ideas regarding the nobility of warfare in his work, the stark reality and honesty of which had a lasting influence on Modernist literature, characterized by a break with beliefs of the past and confrontations with the grimness of reality. Later writers such as Philip Larkin ("An Arundel Tomb") have also cited Owen's work as an influence on their subject and style.

For an example of an entirely different kind of WWI poem, look to Jessie Pope's "Who's for the Game?"—the kind of ultra-patriotic, pro-war writing Owen sought to refute with poems like this one and "Dulce et Decorum Est."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1917, England was the midst of WWI, a global conflict that caused destruction and death on a scale never seen before. Some estimates place total amount of English deaths as a result of the war as over 1 million.

The war had a devastating effect globally, not only in terms of the total number of casualties, estimated to be 40 million, but also in terms of the development of industrial large-scale warfare. Poison gas, a kind of chemical warfare, was introduced on the battlefields of WWI. Shrapnel was also deployed with great frequency during the war.

WWI also caused devastating psychological effects upon soldiers. In 1915, English physician and psychologist Charles Myers first coined the term "shell shock" to describe the lingering effects of this psychological trauma; nowadays, this is referred to as posttraumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. Many soldiers—and indeed civilians—became disillusioned by the war as it dragged on for years. Even after the war ended, many felt that life could no longer return to the certainty and traditions that so comforted them in the past. Life—as well as literature—had been irrevocably affected and changed by the global conflict.

And, of course, this particular poem proved especially prescient in its certainty of "greater wars" in the future as, only about 20 years after its publication, World War II would begin.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to a reading of the poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x83cofH5I9M)
- Chemical War — Learn more about the history of chemical warfare, including the use of chlorine gas in WWI. (https://www.sciencehistory.org/distillations/a-brief-history-of-chemical-war#:~:text=Chlorine%20gas%2C%20used%20on%20the,of%
- BBC's "The Poetry of War" — Watch clips of BBC's program featuring Sam West as Wilfred Owen. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aEUAD9-308Q)
- The Poetry of World War I — Learn more from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/70139/the-poetry-of-world-war-i)
- Who Was Wilfred Owen? — Learn more from the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/people/wilfred-owen)
- Sassoon's "A Letter Home" — Read the full poem that Owen quotes in his epigraph. (https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/a-letter-home/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILFRED OWEN POEMS

- Anthem for Doomed Youth
- Dulce et Decorum Est
- Exposure
- Futility
- Strange Meeting

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