

Cummings Study Guide - *In Flanders Field* Analysis

Type of Work

....."In Flanders Fields" is a **lyric poem** in the format of a French rondeau. A rondeau consists of three stanzas with a total of fifteen lines. Lines 9 and 15 are the same--that is, they make up a refrain. Line 9 occurs at the end of the second stanza and line 15 at the end of the third stanza. These lines are very short and rhyme only with each other and not with any other lines. In a rondeau, all lines except 9 and 15 generally contain eight syllables each.

.....The rhyme scheme of "In Flanders Fields" and other rondeaux is aabba, aabc, aabbac

Year of Composition and Publication

.....John A. McCrae, a lieutenant-colonel and physician in the Canadian Army, wrote the poem in early May 1915 after witnessing the death of a friend. The poem appeared without a byline in the December 8, 1915, issue of *Punch, or the London Charivari*, a British publication.

Background and Setting

.....John A. McCrae, a pathologist and university professor in Canada, enlisted in the First Brigade of the Canadian Artillery shortly after his country entered the First World War in 1914. When allied troops battled the Germans in and around the town of Ypres in the Flanders region of Belgium in 1915, McCrae was serving in this area with his artillery unit. In May 1915, he witnessed the death of a friend in the Second Battle of Ypres. In response, he wrote "In Flanders Fields."

.....Because red poppies thrived in the broken ground of the battlefield, he included them in the poem as symbols of the fallen soldiers buried there. The variety of poppies associated with the Flanders war dead is *Papaver rhoeas*. (To see pictures of these poppies, [click here](#).) After McCrae's poem was published, citizens in many countries began to display poppies or wear paper poppies in observance of Armistice Day and other holidays honoring war veterans.

.....After his service in Belgium, McCrae treated wounded soldiers in France. He died of pneumonia in 1918 .

Point of View

.....McCrae wrote the poem in first-person plural, using *our* and *we* to indicate that the speakers are the war dead.

Meter

.....McCrae presents the poem in iambic tetrameter, in which a line has four pairs of syllables. The first syllable in a pair is unstressed and the second is stressed. The first two lines of "In Flanders Fields" demonstrate the metric pattern:

.....1.....2.....3.....4.....
In FLAN..|.ders FIELDS..|.the POP..|.pies BLOW
.....1.....2.....3.....4.....
Be TWEEN..|.the CROSS..|.es ROW..|.on ROW
Masculine End Rhyme

..... Each of the end rhymes in McCrae's poem is masculine, a rhyme in which the final syllable of one line mimics the sound of the final syllable of another line. Examples: *blow, row, below; sky, fly, lie*.

Figures of Speech

.....Examples of figures of speech in the poem are as follows:

Alliteration

Repetition of a Consonant Sound

Line 1: Flanders fields

Line 2: crosses, row on row

Lines 3, 4, 5: and in the sky / The larks, still bravely singing, fly / Scarce

Line 7: saw sunset

Line 8: Loved and were loved, and now we lie

Lines 10, 11: with the foe: / To you from failing

Line 12: hold it high

Assonance

In Stressed Syllables, Repetition of a Vowel Sound Followed by a Different Consonant Sound

Line 13: break, faith

Metaphor

Comparison of Unlike Things Without Using *Like*, *As*, or *Than*

Line 12: Torch, which is being compared to the duty that the dead soldiers are passing on to the living.

Symbols

Lines 1, 14, Poppies: The war dead. From the blood they shed on the battlefield, seeds germinated, sprouted, and grew into beautiful red flowers that inspire and hearten the living. Line 4, Larks: One may interpret them as symbols of people who have the courage and perseverance to carry on with life amid turmoil.

Line 12, Torch: Duty, obligation.

Themes

Passing the Torch

.....The dead soldiers pass on to the living the duty to continue the fight, as the concluding stanza states. But one may regard the enemy as any foe, including prejudice, disease, poverty, hunger, ignorance, crime, and intolerance.

The Courage to Carry On

.....Amid the horror of war, the strong and the brave carry on with everyday living, refusing to cower before the enemy, as line 4 suggests: *The larks, still bravely singing, fly*. In the German attack on England in 1940 and 1941, the British persevered against a steady onslaught of air bombardments. Between September 7 and early November, 1940, German aircraft attacked London every night. Buildings crumbled. Fires consumed whole neighborhoods. But because the larks kept singing, the German attack failed.

Killing the Future

.....One day the soldiers buried in Flanders Fields were young and healthy, vibrant with hopes and dreams. A few days later, war struck them down--without warning, indiscriminately--leaving them sprawled on a meadow far from home.

Questions:

1. Write a short poem that expresses your feelings about the death of a soldier in Iraq or Afghanistan or another person who died an early death.
2. What do the words *felt dawn* (line 7) mean?
3. Write an essay explaining why such a short poem remains popular today. For example, you might point out that its sentiments can apply to any war, not just World War I. You might also discuss the effect of the poem's rhythmic language.
4. Would the poem have been as effective if it had expressed the feelings of a battlefield survivor lamenting the death of his comrades?