On April 4, 1915, the Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral read a sonnet from the pulpit as part of his Easter Sunday sermon. The sermon was published in The Times the next day, and the sonnet then became, ‘an important document of national preparation for war’.

Originally entitled ‘The Recruit’, Rupert Brooke’s sonnet ‘The Soldier’ was the last in a sonnet sequence entitled ‘1914’.

V. The Soldier

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there’s some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England’s, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

However, just as the idealistic pre-war attitudes of 1914 disintegrated as the realities of war set in and the death count mounted, Brooke’s sonnets also fell out of favour.

But Martin Stephen writes that Brooke’s poems remain important: ‘whatever else they may be, Brooke's sonnets sum up admirably a mood that was felt by many people when war broke out.’

Listening activities

Listen to a reading of the poem from the BBC Learning Zone:
http://www.bbc.co.uk/learningzone/clips/6492.html

Given what you know about trenches and trench warfare, does the setting seem realistic to you? Why do you think the BBC chose a Scottish actor to read the poem?
Now listen to a different reading of the same poem:
http://www.bbc.co.uk/learningzone/clips/6493.html

Which reading conveys the meaning of the poem most effectively? Why?

Listen to the commentary on ‘The Soldier’ (also on the BBC Learning Zone):
http://www.bbc.co.uk/learningzone/clips/commentary-on-rupert-brookes-the-soldier/6495.html

What ideas does it give you about Brooke’s view of ‘Englishness’ and England’s importance? Do you agree? Do you think other war poets (such as Sassoon and Owen) agreed with this idea? Why? Why not?

Close analysis

1. What is the tone of the poem? What words help to create this tone?
2. Read the poem aloud to yourself. Does it have a clear rhythm and rhyme?
3. Who is the poem addressed to, do you think?
4. What aspects of war does the poem deal with? How is this different to another war poet’s treatment of war?
5. What images does Brooke use? What effect do these have?
6. How does Brooke feel about England?
7. What does he mean by ‘a richer dust’?
8. What ideas does Brooke express about death?
9. How are these views on death similar or different to other war poets’ views on death? Which poems do you like best?

Creative opportunity

Now that you’ve seen various interpretations of the poem and ways that it might be performed or filmed, it’s up to you to come up with your own way of reading or performing it.

Try to think of a way to express the lines in the spirit which Brooke may have intended them or, alternatively, try to do something entirely different and original with the poem, which nonetheless stays true to it.