THE SOLDIER  (Rupert Brooke)

CONTEXT

It was written in 1914 at the outbreak of the First World War. It explores the idea of patriotism and, as such, it contrasts the thoughts of Dulce et Decorum Est.

"The Soldier," begins by talking about the soldier's possible death, but the manner in which this poem explores death is not what we might expect. Indeed, it is not so much a gruesome death on the battlefield or in a trench (a very common theme in much World War I poetry) that Brooke writes about. Instead this poem is more about the blissful afterlife that soldiers will get to experience when they die. To die in battle for one's country is noble—even honourable—in Brooke's sonnets, but especially so in "The Soldier. This theme goes against the idea that is explored by Wilfred Owen in Dulce et Decorum Est who says this concept is actually 'the old lie.' It is almost as though 'Dulce' is a response to 'The Soldier.'

Theme

This is what makes 'The Soldier' an unusual war poem. It doesn't engage with the brutal horror we see discussed in 'Dulce' or the traumatic after-effects that are explored in 'The Huntsman.' Instead it seems to embrace the idea that death in service of your country is indeed an honour.

However what is interesting about this poem is the Brooke wrote it in 1914 but before the war begun. We can suggest therefore, that Brooke is writing from a viewpoint that is not informed enough about the realities of war. He isn’t writing from an experienced position.

Therefore we can say that Brooke’s poem accurately sums up the attitude people had BEFORE the war begun. People did not yet fully appreciate the horror that was about to happen.

If I should die, think only this of me,
that there's some corner of a foreign field
that is forever England

It is a poem that talks of great pride in being English even in death. The poet tells us that wherever he falls, that spot would almost remain part of England as his bones would lie there. This is a very PATRIOTIC (Love of your country) poem.

This tells us of the pride the poet has in coming from England.

There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
He talks of his dead body turning to dust. This recalls the words in the funeral service “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust”.

He says he will seep into the ground like a ‘a richer dust,’ suggesting how important an English body is. It tells us he considers an English body more valuable than the soil of some foreign land, perhaps France or Germany.

A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware, gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,

The poet tells us that this is a body that was created, influenced by, inspired by England. The person learned everything they needed to know in England and then left to ‘roam’ the world. It again informs us of the pride the person feels in coming from England.

A body of England’s, breathing English air, washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

Another line that again praises the qualities of England. It talks of the natural beauty of the country. We can presume that the poet is claiming that England is thus a superior, nicer, prettier country than this foreign land the soldier has died in.

And think, this heart, all evil shed away, A pulse in the eternal mind, no less Given somewhere back the thoughts by England given;

The poem changes at this point. (This is known as the Caesura)

He stops talking now of his death and instead explains how dying for your country will give him everlasting (eternal mind) glory in the after-life. This makes him perfectly happy

Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day; And laughter, learnt of friends;

He now sounds as though he is dreaming of heaven as a place like England; a place where he has enjoyed happy times with laughter among friends. This again reminds us of how great a country he feels England is.

And gentleness, in hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

He is happy to die. He has served his country and is proud to do so. He compares his future in heaven to the best of his times living in England.

Meaning - This patriotism, then, is part of what ultimately blinds the speaker to the very real, impending horror of World War I. While we have to cut Brooke some slack for not being able to tell what was to come when he wrote "The Soldier," his speaker is a great example of the kind of naive, overly-romantic thinking that could send millions of people into armed conflict against each other.