Two shots was all it took to suddenly plunge the world into the chaos of all out war. As Archduke Ferdinand of Austria drew his last breath, the rest of the world began to hold theirs as troops mobilized across Europe and prepared for the “war to end all wars.” Carnage swept all fronts with the introduction of chemical warfare, tanks, and trench warfare. By the end of 1918, an estimated 17 million lives were lost, and countless more injured. John McCrae’s “In Flanders Fields” showcases the juxtaposition of a once peaceful life into one of total war. McCrae supposedly wrote this poem after his close friend Alexis Helmer was killed in action (“Poem ‘In Flanders Fields’”). As a result, the poem is from the perspective of a recently deceased soldier, reflecting on how his once peaceful life was suddenly ended in the throes of war. The poem, published in 1915 by the London magazine *Punch*, became a popular symbol of hope for the allies, boosting morale for soldiers and civilians alike (“In Flanders Fields Analysis”).

My interpretation

As stated previously, “In Flanders Fields” is a poem about a deceased soldier reflecting back on his once peaceful life that was cut short in the war. The first three lines marks the setting of the poem. “In Flanders fields the poppies blow / Between the crosses, row on row, / That mark our place; and in the sky” Flanders fields in this context is about the Belgian battlefields where war has leveled the countryside, which gave way for poppies to grow freely. These poppies grew out of the fields where countless soldiers were buried, hence the phrase “Between the crosses, row on row.” The use of “row on row” tries to encapsulate the sheer amount of death that occured on these battlefields, which would’ve been observed by McCrae as a combat medic. “That mark our place; and in the sky” could represent the cross/body being the physical connection to the world, and once dead, is released into the heavens or sky.

The next three lines “The larks, still bravely singing, fly / Scarce heard amid the guns below.” creates contrast in the poem. The songbird larks, continue to fly peacefully above the death and destruction on the western front below them. The larks could represent peace in general, or the spirits of those that were lost in the war, being forgotten by those who are fighting to survive among the chaos below. In this section, McCrae might have wanted to say that peace is just flying above us, waiting to be seen or heard by those below.

The poem continues and states, “We are the Dead. Short days ago / We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow, / Loved and were loved, and now we lie, / In Flanders fields.” This stanza reveals the perspective of the poem from that of a dead soldier. “We” as the dead, just a little while ago, enjoyed the sensations of life such as love, warmth, and sight, yet are suddenly stripped of everything we once held dear by war. “And now we lie, In Flanders Fields” with our countless brothers, reborn among the poppies, far from the home we once loved. This stanza appeals to pathos, as it strikes an emotional chord in the readers. The purpose of this stanza is to humanize the soldiers and to remind the audience that everyone that is fighting in the war once had a life they loved, which they gave up to protect their home and country.

The final stanza has an interesting shift in tone when compared to the rest of the poem. The last stanza begins with “Take up our quarrel with the foe: / To you from failing hands we throw / The torch; be yours to hold it high.” Essentially, this section is McCrae’s attempt to garner more support from the public to join the fight against the enemy. The soldiers in the poem have died, and from their “failing” or dead hands they pass the torch, to join and continue the fight towards victory. “If ye break faith with us who die / We shall not sleep, though poppies grow / In Flanders Fields.” is where things shift to a condescending tone. The deceased soldiers are telling the readers that if they do not continue where they left off on the battlefield, they will not rest easy and will treat you as a disgrace. This section was most likely used to give people the final push to enlist in the fight against their foes. The poem ends with a return to the poppies in Flanders Fields, representing the final resting place, far from home.

Key point review

In the “Critical Essay on ‘In Flanders Fields’”, author Bruce Meyer argued that flowery language, imagery, and motifs allowed “In Flanders Fields” to gain popularity and recognition, without revealing the true nature of World War 1. Naturally, this allowed the poem to be spread as a call to arms to join the Great War, as well as a motivational tool in the field. This is seen most prevalently when the poem suddenly shifts tones between the second and third stanzas. Previously, the poem had a somber, more elegiac tone, which is suddenly shifted into "recruitment poster rhetoric ("Critical Essay on ‘In Flanders Fields’”). Due to this, Meyer delves deeper to address this contrast of rhetoric.

First off, Meyer analyzes the language “puzzle” of the poem. He states that McCrae focuses on the more idyllic and romantic aspects of war, glossing over the “filth and violence of the trench experience.” McCrae also uses the poppies as a repeated symbol, “gently blowing between the crosses” compared to the reality of carnage, death and bombs that would be more commonplace in a time of war. These poppies were later used by civilians as a symbol of remembrance and hope, when in reality the poppies were just a way to gloss over the real horrors of war.

* Secondly, Meyer goes in depth into the poem’s prosody (rhythm and sound)
* Lastly, Meyer analyzes the claim that the poem is a traditional elegy
* Connect with WW1 era of literature
* Conclusion