

B.A. (Final Year), Semester-VI

Subject: Compulsory English (Emanating Voices)

Unit 3: Poetry

The Soldier

- Rupert Brooke

1. Introduction:

Rupert Brooke (1887-1915) was an English poet, chiefly known and popular for his highly impressive war sonnets (poems). He fought actively as a soldier in the First World War (1914-1918).

“The Soldier” is one of his best sonnets and mainly memorable for his worldwide recognition as a war poet of rare worth and poetic excellence. This sonnet describes a soldier’s pride for his country and his self-motivated willingness to die happily for his motherland. It is an exceptionally beautiful and idealistic poem, dealing with the patriotic values of a typically loyal soldier. It is all about the idealism and sincere values that Brooke died believing in firmly, with a spirit of courageousness and unshakeable faith.

2. Summary:

The Poem, ‘The Soldier’ composed by Rupert Brooke, is replete with the feeling of patriotism. The poem gives expression to a genuine love of an English soldier for his homeland. The speaker in the poem is an English soldier. He exhibits deep love and admiration for his country. True to his deep-seated feelings, he says that if he dies on the battlefield while fighting, his body would be likely to be buried in a foreign land. That piece of land, he affirms, would be considered part of England precisely because the dead body of an English soldier lies under it. To him, this foreign dust is rich, but the dust of his body will be richer than the dust where he would be sleeping after death. He says further that England shaped his body from the time of his birth and also gave him (taught him) good thoughts as an individual human being. England blessed his life with flowers and wonderful paths to roam. It was while spending his earlier time there that he breathed in the fresh and wholesome air of England, bathed in her majestic rivers and grew up under its stars’ light. The beautiful environment of England nurtured and developed his overall personality. For these precious endowments, he feels highly indebted to his motherland. Therefore, he would feel happy if he is able to repay this debt he rightfully owes to his homeland.

In the next part of the poem, the poet says that after his demise (death), his soul will be purified of all evils. It will then merge with the all-powerful **divine soul** and thus will become an inseparable part of **Him (the Almighty)**. When this union will take place, he would be able to repay the debt he owes to his country of birth and upbringing. He also says that he will not like to be separated from his motherland even after his death. His soul would then do its best to spread all the noble values and ideals that he learnt from his country. He will go places to tell others about the beautiful sights and sounds of England. His country, England blessed him with remarkable qualities like lofty aspirations and joyfulness. He would then spread this spirit of cheerfulness and admiration to others he would be likely to meet during the next course of his journey. This attitude of the poet clearly shows how much the soldier loves his country. The first line of the poem implies that people need not grieve (mourn) the soldier’s death and throughout the remaining part of this poem, the poet enumerates the reasons for this suggestion through the picture of his country he brings alive before our eyes.

The poem is a sonnet, a love poem addressed to England. The soldier suggested through the title of the poem is an anonymous person. The opening line “If I should die”, suggests an acceptance of death and the verb ‘should’ indicates the soldier’s willingness to die for his country. Similarly, the words “richer dust” suggest that the mortal remains of his body are superior to the ground he lies in because he is English even after his burial and not foreign. The mention of dust suggests to us the religious idea of our bodies becoming ‘dust’ when we are no more. A pulse in the eternal mind, a poetic phrase, explains that the soldier’s presence in the soil of foreign land will always live on, making him immortal. Similarly, ‘under an English heaven’ shows the soldier’s rightful pride in England as he considers England to be almost like a paradise. Hence to him, the good fortune to die in England’s name and honour would definitely bring him ‘peace’.

This fine war sonnet, beginning with the idea of the anonymous soldier’s death, also asserts that his decomposing body will infuse the ground around him with a little of his English (country) values and ideals. The second and middle part of the poem personifies England and describes how he considers his country to be picturesque and beautiful. In the final stanza of the poem, the poet suggests that he would be able to attain some form of immortality under a ‘heaven’ that is “English” after dying a brave soldier’s death.

3. Glossary:

- *bore*: gave birth to
- *roam*: wander, move with freedom and in a leisurely way
- *ways*: roads and trails
- *blest*: archaic (older and out of use) form of ‘blessed’
- *replete with*: full of
- *exhibits*: shows, expresses sincerely and openly
- *wholesome*: refreshing and pure, beneficial to health
- *nurtured*: brought-up and nourished with love and care
- *endowments*: blessings, provisions of love
- *indebted*: feeling obliged to; owing thankfulness/gratitude to
- *lofty*: high, sublime and of the purest kind
- *aspirations*: something that one hopes to achieve
- *grieve*: to feel and express deep sorrow at someone’s death; to mourn someone’s death
- *anonymous*: without name; nameless
- *personification*: a figure of speech – here describing England in terms of a living person; embodiment
- *picturesque*: attractive in appearance (especially of a place), especially in an old-fashioned way

4. Comprehension:

- **Answer the following questions in about 150 words each:**

Q.1] Who is the speaker in the poem and what eventuality does he describe? How does he view his fate?

Answer: The speaker in the poem ‘The Soldier’ stands for a particular type of person, more broadly – the patriotic English soldier. The title of the poem suggests that he is an anonymous person, an archetype (an original pattern or model) – a kind of idealized version of how a soldier ought to be. He has deep love and admiration for his native homeland. He expresses his joyful willingness to die for his country and the very opening line indicates his acceptance of death while fighting a war in a foreign land. He implies that if he dies, people need not grieve his death. People should not feel sad about his death. Therefore, the poem as a whole is intensely patriotic in scope and it is this patriotism which is behind the speaker’s description of the eventuality in war he talks about – a sudden death in war.

He says that if he meets his death in any battle, he would be buried in a far-off foreign land. That piece of foreign land should be considered a part of England. In this way, a piece of foreign land would become a permanent part of England, a ‘richer dust’.

Throughout the poem, the speaker views his fate not with a feeling of sadness and loss of a soldier’s life, but with a positive sense of fulfilment and idealistic pride. He says that after death, his heart will be purified of all evils, his soul will merge with the ‘eternal mind’, and would be able to give back the thoughts given to him by England – his laughter, the beauty of England’s sights and sounds, the gentleness in ‘hearts at peace’- learnt from his country which is almost like a paradise to him, and so to die in England’s name and honour would bring him ‘peace’.

Q.2] What does a ‘foreign field’ refer to? What does the speaker think may happen to him?

Answer: The expression ‘foreign field’ in the poem ‘The Soldier’ refers to a (any) piece of a (any) foreign land where the soldier would be fighting in a war and would be willing to die happily for his country, a ‘far-off’ place away from the motherland of the speaker.

The poet says that ‘some corner’ of this foreign field – the land where he would lay down his life while fighting a war, that piece of ‘earth’ will be enriched with the burial touch of his dead body because his body is made from dust (dirt), born in England. His homeland England created (gave birth to) him and gave him his consciousness, his thoughts and shaped his unique personality. England blessed him with its blooming plants to fall in love with – beautiful sights and sounds – and also gave him his sense of joyful freedom. His body, therefore, as a soldier and a citizen, properly belongs to England – the country of his native origin. From the time of his birth, he was always fortunate to ‘breathe in’ his ‘English’ air. He also says with pride that his body is, in reality, is the ‘richer dust’ of England because he was born and brought-up in England. Hence, wherever his body would be buried, it will be of England forever and would be claimed and considered a part of England.

He also declares with a sense of fulfilment that after his death, his heart will shed away all evil and will continue spreading only joy and gratitude for his motherland, once it will be able to find ‘a pulse in the eternal mind’- the state of the individual soul uniting with the divine soul.

Q.3] What is the ‘richer dust’ composed of? How did England shape that dust?

Answer: In the first eight lines (octave) of this war sonnet, we come across the beautiful poetic phrase 'richer dust'. This poem 'The Soldier', composed by Rupert Brooke, is full of the feeling of patriotism expressed by a faithful soldier. In the poem, everything revolves around the thoughts of a soldier who is fighting in a field of war. He talks about his death in the war. After his death on the battlefield, he wants to be remembered in a particular way. He says that the corner of his grave where he would be lying buried under a 'foreign ground' - will become England herself (itself). He also speaks about what the listeners and viewers of England should be reminded of, if they happen to visit his grave in future times.

The poet further describes that if he dies, his body will be interred in a foreign soil, a piece of land away from England. That part of earth will be enriched by the touch of his dead body because his body is made from 'dust' born in England. In this way the poet admires 'that rich earth' (foreign field), he wants himself to be laid to rest in that 'same' foreign land where he would be likely to attain martyrdom as an eventuality of war. Besides he also expresses his deeply felt indebtedness to his motherland England. He says with a sense of pride that England gave birth to him as a person and also gave him his good thoughts and sound consciousness. His country shaped his personality, taught him proper awareness, gave him beautiful flowers to see and love, and the wonderful roads and trails of England for the poet to roam about. His body, to him, is a body of England's which was happy to breathe native English air, washed and bathed by her beautiful rivers and blessed abundantly by bright 'suns of home (England).

Q.4] What are the key themes in Rupert Brooke's poem 'The Soldier'? Support your answer with suitable examples from the poem.

Answer: Through the poem 'The Soldier' the poet explores the firm bond between a patriotic British soldier and his native homeland. The soldier in the poem passionately discusses his intimate relationship with England. Through this discussion, the poem implies that people are shaped by their home environment and native culture and that their country is something worth defending with their life. The soldier sees himself as owing his identity and happiness to England – and it is precisely for this reason that he is willing to sacrifice his life for the greater good of his nation. Patriotism, then, is one of the major themes of this poem.

The poem argues implicitly that nations have their own specific character and values, and that in the context of this soldier, England's values are especially worthy of loud praise.

The thoughts of war and death give rise to fear in the minds of people, particularly the violent kind of death that war can bring to anyone. However, the speaker of 'The Soldier' is prepared to die because he believes he would be doing it for his beloved motherland. The speaker thus does not want people to mourn his death. He is able to foresee that opportunity of dying a hero's death in some far-off 'foreign field' as a particular way of making a small territorial piece of the world 'forever England'. He sees himself as an embodiment, a creation of his native land of birth. Hence meeting death away from one's country on a foreign field, would immortalize a small part of his home nation in some corner of that foreign land. The poem, in this way, portrays nationhood (the theme) as something inseparable from a person's identity – even in the event of that person's death.

There is nothing in the poem of the usual horrors of war. There is very little description of the grim realities of war at all. However, throughout the poem, the theme of death makes itself felt very clearly – especially from the soldier's viewpoint.

Q.5] Death occupies a central place in this sonnet. How does it do so? What do you think the speaker's relationship with death is? How is death viewed and talked about in the poem?

Answer: 'The Soldier' as a whole is an idealistic poem, dealing with the patriotic values of a typically loyal soldier. This fourteen-line sonnet is about war and a soldier's sense of duty towards his country, in a sense completely different from other such poems on the subject of war. However, the theme of death predominates through every single line of the poem, with a very positive suggestion made by this soldier that if he dies, people need not grieve his death. The very first line of the poem makes this suggestion crystal clear. But his memory that the soldier would like to leave behind in the minds of others even after his death, is preferred by him to be one of pride – a rich and glorious legacy. This clear in the line: 'some corner of a foreign field, that is forever England'.

Death definitely occupies a central place in this sonnet of war, but the speaker does not associate this eventuality of death in war with any sense of a loss of life – utterly wasted. The poet clearly sees death, an outcome of war, as worthy of honour and glorious memory. The speaker's relationship with death, then, is one of comfortable companionship, willingness to embrace it, gratitude and deep sense of patriotism, a token of honour for one's dear homeland and an opportunity for immortalizing a piece of foreign land as 'forever England'. While thinking of death, he has the courage to think of the soldier's self as something 'imperishable'.

Nowhere in this poem does the poet describe the actual horrors of war and the mass-scale bloodshed that goes with it. Instead, he looks at war and death as a stepping stone to permanent national glory. To this soldier, death would be a brilliant opportunity to pay back to his English soil and society – all the good qualities of joyfulness and lofty values that he learnt from his home country and which developed him as a well-adjusted individual human being with healthy thoughts and loving nature. Indeed, the poet expresses and praises the remarkable beauty of England's natural 'sights and sounds' which groomed his own patriotic nature and nationhood.

***Multiple Choice Questions:**

Choose the correct answer from the options given below:

- 1) Why does the speaker anticipate his death in the first line of the poem?
 - a) He suffers from a serious illness.
 - b) He has been separated from his country.
 - c) He is going to war.
 - d) He is a prisoner of war.

Answer: He is going to war.

- 2) 'A dust whom England bore'. What does the word 'dust' refer to here?
 - a) soldiers of a foreign field
 - b) the speaker of the poem
 - c) the soil of England
 - d) the soil brought from foreign lands

Answer: the soil of England

- 3) Why does the speaker say that 'some corner of a foreign field' will be 'fore ever England'?
- a) The foreign field is owned by England now.
 - b) An English soldier will be buried there.
 - c) England won the battle being fought.
 - d) The 'foreign field' originally belonged to England.

Answer: An English soldier will be buried there.

- 4) The poem suggests that at his death, the soldier will be:
- a) freed of all evils
 - b) freed of all pain
 - c) freed of all burdens of life
 - d) freed of his country

Answer: freed of all evils

- 5) Which of the following statements is false?
- a) The soldier is willing to sacrifice himself for his country.
 - b) The soldier is from England.
 - c) The soldier belongs to the 'foreign field'.
 - d) The soldier is proud of his country.

Answer: The soldier belongs to the 'foreign field'

- 6) Which of these is one of the main themes of the poem?
- a) hope
 - b) patriotism
 - c) rebirth
 - d) spirituality

Answer: patriotism

- 7) When he is dying, the soldier is thinking of:
- a) his enemy
 - b) the war
 - c) heaven
 - d) his country

Answer: his country

- 8) 'Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day'. Who is the 'her' being referred to here?
- a) the speaker's mother
 - b) the speaker's beloved
 - c) the speaker's country
 - d) the speaker's fate

Answer: the speaker's country

- 9) Identify the name of the poet who wrote the poem 'The Soldier':
- a) Sarojini Naidu
 - b) William Ernest Henley
 - c) John Milton
 - d) Rupert Brooke

Answer: Rupert Brooke

10) Which of the following statements is false?

- a) Rupert Brooke was a well-known war poet of his time.
- b) The poem 'The Soldier' is an idealistic expression.
- c) The poem deals with the patriotic values of a soldier.
- d) The soldier in this poem did not belong to England.

Answer: The soldier in this poem did not belong to England.
