War is Kind

POEM TEXT

Do not weep, maiden, for war is kind.
Because your lover threw wild hands toward the sky
And the affrighted steed ran on alone,
Do not weep.
War is kind.

Hoarse, booming drums of the regiment,
Little souls who thirst for fight,
These men were born to drill and die.
The unexplained glory flies above them,
Great is the battle-god, great, and his kingdom—
A field where a thousand corpses lie.

Do not weep, babe, for war is kind.
Because your father tumbled in the yellow trenches,
Raged at his breast, gulped and died,
Do not weep.
War is kind.

Swift, blazing flag of the regiment,
Eagle with crest of red and gold,
These men were born to drill and die.
Point for them the virtue of slaughter,
Make plain to them the excellence of killing
And a field where a thousand corpses lie.

Mother whose heart hung humble as a button
On the bright splendid shroud of your son,
Do not weep.
War is kind.

SUMMARY

The speaker tells a grieving young woman not to cry, claiming that war is kind. As supposed evidence, the speaker describes the woman's lover—a soldier who has died in battle—throwing up his hands and falling off his frightened horse as it ran on without him. The speaker again tells her not to cry and claims that war is kind.

Next, the speaker addresses the loud drums of the soldier's unit, personifying them as "souls" eager for battle. The speaker tells these drums that the men of the unit were born to train for, and die in, war. The speaker refers to a vague spirit of military glory that soars above these men, insists that the god of war is great, and describes this god's kingdom as a field full of corpses.

The speaker now tells the soldier's baby not to cry, claiming again that war is kind. As supposed evidence, the speaker describes the soldier dying painfully in the battlefield trenches. Once again, the speaker insists that the baby should not cry and that war is kind.

Next, the speaker addresses the battle flag of the dead soldier's unit, noting its striking design featuring an eagle and red and gold coloring. Again the speaker claims that the men of the unit were born to train for, and die in, war. Again undermining his own supposed message, the speaker urges the flag to convince the soldier's unit that mass killing is virtuous and that its result—a field full of corpses—is excellent.

Finally, the speaker tells the soldier's mother, who humbly mourned her son when he came home in a burial shroud, not to cry. Once more, the speaker claims that war is kind.

THEMES

THE CRUELTY AND SENSELESSNESS OF WAR

In Stephen Crane's "War Is Kind," a speaker addresses both a dead soldier's loved ones and the personified flags and drums of his regiment, insisting to the former that "war is kind" and to the latter that war is glorious. All these stirring declarations, however, are juxtaposed with realistic images of battlefield suffering, showing that war is actually cruel and senseless. Through its hollow appeals to grieving family members and inanimate objects, the poem illustrates not just war's horror and futility but its indefensibility.

The poem's assurances to the soldier's loved ones are full of irony: they show that war has been the opposite of "kind." The speaker addresses the soldier's "maiden" (young lover or wife), "babe" (infant), and "mother" in turn, outlandishly claiming that "war is kind" and instructing them not to "weep." Yet the details the speaker offers to the dead soldier's family make it clear that the soldier died gruesomely, then came home to his family in a burial shroud. War is brutal, the poem thus suggests, and the soldier's family has every reason to weep.

Likewise, the poem's appeals to the "drums" and "flag" of the soldier's unit ironically claim that war is glorious and virtuous while showing the opposite. In between addresses to the soldier's family, the speaker addresses the ceremonial gear of

the soldier's regiment: items designed to make the army seem impressive and grand. The speaker invokes them as if they can help confirm the "glory," "virtue," and "excellence" of war. But at the same time, he twice describes "a field where a thousand corpses lie"—an image of senseless carnage. Again, what the poem says is in direct contrast to what it shows. It pretends to glorify war, yet portrays war as appalling.

The poem makes its point even clearer by addressing its defenses of war to "listeners" who can't possibly be convinced. By extension, it implies that *any* defense of war is absurd. Family members grieving a dead soldier might be persuaded that war is necessary, but not that it's "kind"! Meanwhile, inanimate objects can't be persuaded of anything at all. The appeals to the family sound hopelessly insensitive, while the appeals to drums and flag sound ridiculous. These qualities once again signal to the reader that the poem means the opposite of what it says.

Through its ironic juxtaposition of horrible violence and empty consolations, the poem mocks real-life, "comforting" justifications of war, implying that they, too, are insensitive and ridiculous. It insists that "These men were born to drill and die," but it doesn't mention a cause they're dying *for* nor any other detail that might offset the grimness of their fate. Its hollow defense conveys the message that war is indefensible.

Overall, then, the poem satirizes pro-war sentiment. Though it claims to offer evidence of war's glory, it doesn't show heroic battlefield scenes or endorse a "cause" (as much pro-war propaganda does). Instead, it shows a beloved young man dying grimly alongside a thousand others. The poem's ironic, realistic view of war is typical of Crane, whose writing (including his famous war novel *The Red Badge of Courage*) aimed to puncture romantic myths and expose hard social truths.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-26

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-5

Do not weep, maiden, for war is kind.
Because your lover threw wild hands toward the sky
And the affrighted steed ran on alone,
Do not weep.
War is kind.

Lines 1-5 are addressed to a young woman (a "maiden") grieving for her "lover," a soldier who has died in battle. Like all the other stanzas in the poem, this one uses a rhetorical device called apostrophe: it addresses someone (or something) who isn't literally present or isn't actually expected to respond.

The speaker tells the maiden not to "weep," adding the suspicious claim that "war is kind." The evidence the speaker provides for this claim is equally suspicious: that the soldier fell off his frightened horse ("affrighted steed") during a battle, flailing toward the sky as the horse ran on without him:

Most likely, the soldier fell because he was wounded. Another possibility is that he simply took a (painful, dangerous) tumble when his horse got spooked. Either way, this isn't really proof of war's "kindness": it's proof of war's *cruelty*. Note how the assonance of "wild"/"sky"/"affrighted" adds punchy emphasis to the poem's description of a jarring moment.

The speaker's language and logic here are strained and bizarre ("Because your lover [fell off a horse in battle ...] Do not weep"), yet the speaker asserts that "War is kind" as if no further evidence is needed. What the speaker is saying is so clearly untrue that the poem immediately establishes a sense of irony. Whether or not the *speaker* truly believes these absurd claims, the *poet* believes the opposite. Crane trusts the reader to understand the ironic gap between his speaker's words and his own meaning—a gap that will continue throughout the poem.

While the repetition of "Do not weep" and "war is kind" might sound reassuring on the surface, it's in fact disturbing. It's as though the speaker is trying to pressure or lull the maiden into believing something that can't be true. These phrases also establish a refrain that will repeat at the end of the third and fifth stanzas (and appear in line 12 as well).

Finally, the terms "maiden" and "lover" are also interesting: they raise the possibility that the woman and the soldier were unmarried. ("Maiden" usually referred to an unmarried young woman, and a husband isn't typically referred to as a "lover.") If so, they had a baby (see line 12) out of wedlock: a situation that, in Crane's 19th-century America, would likely cause added financial stress and/or social scandal for the widowed mother; unmarried mothers in Crane's society were often treated as outcasts. (Crane tackled subjects such as poverty, social outcast status, and "abandoned" women in some of his other work, including the novel *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*.)

In that case, this "maiden" may have more than one reason to weep. Then again, Crane might just be using a word often applied to young women in older poetry, such as the ballad tradition that "War Is Kind" draws on.

LINES 6-8

Hoarse, booming drums of the regiment,
Little souls who thirst for fight,
These men were born to drill and die.

Lines 6-8 shift to addressing the "drums of the regiment"—that is, the regiment the soldier belonged to before he died. (A regiment is a unit of military troops.) The poem's implied setting thus shifts from the soldier's home to the battlefield.

In the late 1800s, when Crane wrote, some armies still

marched into battle with drummers in their ranks. Drums were also used then, as they are now, in military parades and ceremonies. The speaker not only addresses such drums but personifies them, projecting the human appetite for war onto objects that humans carry *into* war. Here the speaker imagines the drums as "Little souls" who are "Hoarse" from "booming" and "thirst[y]" for conflict. In other words, they're compared to people whose voices are dry and rough because they're shouting for, and "thirst[y]" for, war.

The speaker then claims that "These men"—the soldiers of the regiment—"were born to drill and die." Here, "drill" means "train for war." Notice the shift away from the superficially comforting tone of the first stanza. The speaker is now blatantly treating soldiers as disposable and welcoming their early deaths. Notice, too, that the speaker doesn't mention what they're dying *for* (an important cause, a moral principle, etc.). It's as if war's purpose is irrelevant apart from its efficiency as a killing machine. And on the level of sound, the alliteration of "drill" and "die" reinforces the connection between combat training and death.

Once again, the *poet*'s view is the opposite of what the *speaker* claims to believe. Crane is using irony to imply that these men were born for much more than an early death—that war is a waste of their lives.

LINES 9-11

> *The unexplained glory flies above them,*
> *Great is the battle-god, great, and his kingdom—*
> *A field where a thousand corpses lie.*

Lines 9-11 continue the poem's grimly ironic praise of war. The speaker claims that "The unexplained glory flies above" soldiers on the battlefield. This odd phrase might be meant to evoke an abstract spirit of glory floating above the soldiers, or even the "battle-god" mentioned in the next line. Alternatively, it could be an indirect way of referring to a battle flag (such as "Old Glory," the American flag).

Regardless, the speaker is praising the glory of the deadly battle. However, with the word "unexplained," the poet's true beliefs peek through the irony. No explanation is given as to what *makes* this dying glorious. The reader isn't told why the "drums" (or the humans whose feelings are projected onto them) crave war, or what any of these men are dying *for*. The "glory" of their sacrifice is a vague claim asserted without evidence. This makes it seem unimpressive and, in fact, sinister.

The speaker then insistently praises the "battle-god" (perhaps an allusion to the Greek war god Ares or his Roman equivalent, Mars). The alliteration of "great" and "god," as well as the repetition of the word "great," itself, helps drive home this feeling of insistence.

Such gods are often portrayed as strong, fierce, ruthless, and glorious. Here the pro-war *speaker* praises the battle-god's "great[ness]," but Crane, the anti-war *poet*, shows that the god's "kingdom" is actually pathetic: just a field of dead bodies. The poem implicitly asks readers: how "great" could the battle-god—and by extension, war itself—possibly be if its "kingdom" is nothing but a wasteland of dead bodies?

LINES 12-16

> *Do not weep, babe, for war is kind.*
> *Because your father tumbled in the yellow trenches,*
> *Raged at his breast, gulped and died,*
> *Do not weep.*
> *War is kind.*

Lines 12-16 follow the structure of the first stanza, only now the speaker is addressing a "babe" (baby), presumably belonging to the soldier and maiden mentioned at the beginning of the poem. This makes the speaker's reassurance even more suspicious: a baby can't possibly understand or evaluate the claim being made or the evidence being presented. Even an older child would still be likely to cry for a dead father, and wouldn't accept that the war that killed him was "kind."

Again, both the speaker's claim and evidence for that are absurdly unconvincing. To prove war's "kind[ness]," the speaker describes the soldier dying in the "trenches" of the battlefield:

- This is a reference to trench warfare, during which troops shelter in and fire out of fortified ditches. This kind of combat can be notoriously brutal and exhausting, as in the American Civil War or World War I.
- This soldier "tumbled in the yellow trenches" after being wounded, whether in this moment or in the earlier moment when he fell from his horse.
- Notice how the alliteration of "tumbled" and "trenches" makes the verse more percussive and jarring as it describes this jarring scene.
- "Raged at his breast, gulped, and died," meanwhile, indicates that the soldier tore at the clothes on his chest—perhaps opening his shirt to uncover the wound—and gulped for air before drawing his last breath.

It's a stark, frightening image, almost comically inappropriate to describe to a baby. It's also an unheroic image: this soldier didn't die in a brave or picturesque way, but in an ugly struggle for breath after falling off a horse. Crane may be suggesting that this experience is more representative of war's reality than hero narratives. It's certainly more evidence of war's cruelty.

Again, though, the speaker calmly repeats: "Do not weep. War is kind." This refrain becomes more outrageous as the poem's brutal imagery accumulates. Ultimately, of course, the poem *wants* to outrage the reader into opposing war.

LINES 17-19

Swift, blazing flag of the regiment,
Eagle with crest of red and gold,
These men were born to drill and die.

Lines 17-19 address another inanimate object: the flag of the soldier's regiment, with its "blazing" red-gold colors and "Eagle" design. As with the drums in lines 6-8, the speaker treats this object as if it were alive. The speaker first calls it a "flag," then an "Eagle" (as if its design had come to life), and describes it as "Swift" (as if *it* were running fast, rather than the men who carry it into battle).

The speaker then repeats an earlier claim from line 8: "These men were born to drill and die." Like the poem's other repetitions, this one has an overly insistent quality. The speaker is again making a cruel and unbelievable claim (one that the poet does not believe), and again directing it toward a "listener" that can't actually listen or agree. The repetitions and rhyme in the second and fourth stanzas also make them resemble, structurally, the chorus that falls between the verses of a song. That structure makes some sense here: "War Is Kind" is a sort of satire on conventional war ballads.

There may be some symbolism lurking in that "Eagle," which is often used to represent the United States. Crane was an American poet who famously wrote about American wars, including the Civil War. It's possible, then, that the battle portrayed in this poem is modeled on Civil War battlefields, and that, when the poem addresses the "Eagle," it's really speaking to America. (In other words, Crane may be aiming his satirical anti-war message at a distinctly American audience.)

LINES 20-22

Point for them the virtue of slaughter,
Make plain to them the excellence of killing
And a field where a thousand corpses lie.

Lines 20-22 continue addressing the flag of the soldier's regiment. Like the drums in the second stanza, the flag, as a ceremonial military item, symbolizes military pride and zeal. Troops carried these items into battle not only for practical purposes but to look and sound intimidating and "glorious." In other words, they're used to glorify war.

Glorifying war is exactly what the speaker wants the flag to do. But, again, the terms the speaker uses ironically undermine the supposed glory. Defenders of war typically mention virtues like honor, courage, responsibility, and the willingness to fight for what's right. But the speaker, instead, wants to emphasize the "virtue of slaughter," "the excellence of killing," and the excellence of "a field where a thousand corpses lie." This makes war sound murderous, not virtuous or glorious—and that's exactly Crane's point.

As with the "drums" before, there's an element of personification in the speaker's appeal. Neither the "flag" nor its "Eagle" can actually explain the virtues of war, but the speaker seems to treat the flag as if it had human capabilities. Along with the celebration of mass death, the weirdness of talking to a flag this way makes the speaker seem a little unhinged. That's one of the ways in which the poem satirizes pro-war attitudes: Crane is suggesting that these attitudes spring from an irrational love of violence rather than a love of honor, justice, and so on.

The repetition of the "thousand corpses" line at the end of the stanza turns it into a second refrain. As in line 11, the closing rhyme ("die"/"lie") gives a sense of finality, appropriate to a line about mass slaughter.

LINES 23-26

Mother whose heart hung humble as a button
On the bright splendid shroud of your son,
Do not weep.
War is kind.

Lines 23-26 conclude the poem with one last apostrophe. The speaker now addresses the dead soldier's mother, who grieved him at his funeral as he lay wrapped in an impressive burial shroud. (As a veteran who died in combat, he seems to have been buried with considerable ceremony.)

Unlike the parallel first and third stanzas, this one contains four lines instead of five, as it does not begin with a version of "Do not weep, [X], for war is kind." Instead, it begins with "Mother," and places her emotional experience vividly in the foreground (rather than just implying that she is "weep[ing]"). As a result, this stanza is arguably the most emotionally direct and powerful in the poem.

The "humble" heart of the mother makes for a pointed contrast with the "splendid" shroud, which features a "bright" design and presumably is made of fine material. The soldier is decked out in glory, but that glory seems false and worthless beside his mother's simple grief. The bright, glorious shroud also hides the unpleasant truth of his wounded, dead body. More figuratively, it hides the truth of *how* he died: not as a picturesque hero, but in an ugly, clumsy, painful way.

Alliteration helps tie together lines 23 ("whose heart hung humble") and 24 ("splendid [...] son") with soft /h/ and /s/ sounds reminiscent of sighing and whispering. An imperfect rhyme, or eye rhyme, links "button" and "son," also subtly emphasizes the attachment the mother's heart still feels for the soldier.

The final repetition of "Do not weep. / War is kind" seems especially devastating and ironic after the poignant image of the mother's heart. (How, the poem encourages readers to ask, can anything that causes this deep maternal grief be labeled "kind"?) It's a final, stark reinforcement of the poem's key themes: the cruelty not only of war itself but of the lies used to justify it.

SYMBOLS

DRUMS

Many armies in the 19th century marched into combat accompanied by drummers (though the practice was fading by the time Crane wrote his poem), and drums are still used in military parades and ceremonies. As a result, drums are symbolically linked not only with war itself but also with the run-up to war: the process of rallying public enthusiasm, preparing to fight, and marching into conflict. Leaders are sometimes described as "beating the drums of war" or "drumming up" support for a cause.

The drums in the poem are personified as "Hoarse, booming [...] Little souls who thirst for fight." The poem addresses them as if they were not only accompanying the fighting but eager for it. It compares their dry, booming sound to people shouting themselves hoarse with enthusiasm for war. Thus, the drums serve as a symbol for war fever and the human beings—politicians, soldiers, the public—who embrace it.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-7:** " Hoarse, booming drums of the regiment, / Little souls who thirst for fight,"

THE FLAG

The "flag" in the fourth stanza belongs to the soldier's "regiment," or fighting unit, and represents military pride and patriotism. In appealing to the flag of the regiment, the speaker is appealing to these values, as if to a leader who could convince soldiers of the "excellence" of war. Overall, however, the poem makes the case that these values are hollow.

This design of this particular flag also features an eagle, which is associated with strength, pride, ferocity, freedom (in the U.S., where it's the national bird), as well as with the U.S. itself. In the context of this anti-war poem, the eagle is an ironic detail. This flag waves over a scene that illustrates the cruelty and shame of war, the vulnerability of warriors, the men's lack of control over their fate ("born to drill and die")—in other words, the opposite of what the eagle is supposed to stand for. As an American poet, Crane may be commenting on the injustice of American wars especially.

The flag's design also includes "red and gold." These are common battle flag colors, but here they might carry some negative symbolism as well. Red is traditionally associated with blood and gold with money, so Crane might intend these colors to represent the violent, corrupt nature of war.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 17-18:** " Swift, blazing flag of the regiment, / Eagle with crest of red and gold,"

THE SHROUD

A shroud is a burial garment that covers the body of the deceased. The speaker describes the soldier's shroud as "bright" and "splendid"; as a veteran killed in action, he's been buried with great ceremony. However, since the poem as a whole illustrates the cruelty of war, the "splendid" shroud comes off as superficial and misleading—especially compared with the "humble" integrity of the mother's grief.

In general, shrouds are symbolically linked with concealment. Readers can take this shroud as representing a fancy facade hiding the brutal reality of the soldier's death, and by extension, the brutality of war.

The shroud may also carry some religious symbolism. The Bible calls attention to the linen in which Jesus was shrouded after crucifixion; this detail has given rise to claims that the linen survives today, as the "Shroud of Turin" or some other relic. The Bible also mentions the presence of Mary, Jesus's mother, at the crucifixion, a detail that's prompted many artistic portrayals of Mary cradling her martyred son's body (a subject known in Western art as a *pietà*). Crane may be evoking a similar scene here, casting the shrouded soldier as a martyr to the cruelty of war.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 23-24:** "Mother whose heart hung humble as a button / On the bright splendid shroud of your son,"

POETIC DEVICES

REPETITION

Repetition is crucial to the structure of the poem. The phrases "Do not weep" and "war is kind" are repeated five times in just 26 lines, including as a refrain at the end of the first, third, and fifth stanzas. This repetition has an unsettling, excessive, insistent quality. It's as if the speaker is trying to pressure or hypnotize the grieving family—or the reader—into believing an obviously false claim that "war is kind." And yet, that claim doesn't become any more true with repetition: in fact, it only becomes more absurd in the context of the poem, as the speaker reveals more of war's cruelties.

Repetition governs the rest of the poem, too. The poem repeatedly addresses the dead soldier's loved ones (stanzas 1, 3, 5) and the ceremonial gear of his regiment (stanzas 2 and 4). It repeatedly offers questionable "evidence" of war's kindness

(lines 2-3 and 13-14). It repeats the line "These men were born to drill and die" (lines 8, 19) verbatim, and its rhyming line (11, 22) almost verbatim. As a recurring line at the end of a stanza, "[And] a field where a thousand corpses lie" becomes a second refrain.

These repetitions help to organize what is, rhythmically speaking, an experiment in free verse. The poem doesn't follow a strict meter, but otherwise, it's highly structured. The combination of predictable and unpredictable elements, order and disorder, may be meant to reflect the subject of war: a disciplined activity that results in the chaos of mass death.

Finally, a special kind of repetition, called diacope, occurs in line 10, as the word "great" repeats with only a few words in between. Here, diacope helps signal the verbal irony of the line: it's as if the speaker is sarcastically describing the god of war as, "Great, just great." (Alternatively, if the *speaker* believes what they're saying but the *poet* knows better, the repetition might be a sign of the speaker's excessive fervor for war.)

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Do not weep, maiden, for war is kind. / Because your"
- **Lines 4-5:** "Do not weep. / War is kind."
- **Line 8:** " These men were born to drill and die."
- **Line 10:** " Great," "great"
- **Line 11:** " A field where a thousand corpses lie."
- **Lines 12-13:** "Do not weep, babe, for war is kind. / Because your"
- **Lines 15-16:** "Do not weep. / War is kind."
- **Line 19:** " These men were born to drill and die."
- **Line 22:** " And a field where a thousand corpses lie."
- **Lines 25-26:** "Do not weep. / War is kind."

APOSTROPHE

Each stanza in the poem directly addresses a different listener who can't literally hear or respond: the maiden, the drums of the regiment, the baby, the flag of the regiment, and the mother.

All of these apostrophes have an element of irony and absurdity. The speaker directs the claim that "war is kind" toward a dead soldier's widow, baby, and mother—three people who are exceptionally unlikely to believe it. (And, of course, the baby can't even understand such a claim yet.) The speaker directs the claims about war's "glory" and "virtue" toward inanimate objects, which can't understand or believe anything at all.

Although a fanciful, non-literal quality is part of all apostrophe (in Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," for example, the reader knows the bird doesn't actually hear or care what the poet's saying), Crane heightens this quality in order to make his anti-war point. His speaker is trying to convince people of a claim they could *never* accept at heart—a claim that would only distress them more—and trying to convince objects that are indifferent to the mass suffering around them. In the process, the speaker sounds as cruel and callous as war itself.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-5
- Lines 6-8
- Lines 12-16
- Lines 17-22
- Lines 23-26

IRONY

"War Is Kind" uses sharp, consistent irony. From the title to the final line, the poem says the opposite of what it really means. This type of irony is known as verbal irony and is closely related to sarcasm. (Alternatively, the speaker of the poem might be a persona, or character, who *does* mean what they're saying, while the poet and the reader know better. This would be more like dramatic irony.)

In other words, readers can get a good sense of the *poet's* message just by reading all of the speaker's claims as false. The poet believes that war is cruel, not kind; that the widow, baby, and mother have every right to weep; that soldiers were born to do much more than "drill and die" (i.e., that war is a waste of life); and so on.

However, there are moments in the poem where the poet's true feelings and judgments peek through the irony. One is the phrase "unexplained glory" (line 9). Crane doesn't believe some abstract glory hangs over this war, but he does think the glory that's *supposed* to surround war is unexplained, vague, and ultimately meaningless. The little tidbit of truth in the adjective helps give away the sarcasm of the statement as a whole.

Similarly, the descriptions in lines 2-3, 13-14, and 23-24 show the grim reality of the soldier's (and his mother's) experience, making the "War is kind" refrain all the more devastating in its ironic falsehood. By letting the mask of irony slip here and there, Crane cues the reader in to his real message.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "war is kind."
- **Line 5:** "War is kind."
- **Line 8:** " These men were born to drill and die."
- **Lines 10-11:** " Great is the battle-god, great, and his kingdom— / A field where a thousand corpses lie."
- **Line 12:** "war is kind."
- **Line 16:** "War is kind."
- **Lines 19-22:** " These men were born to drill and die. / Point for them the virtue of slaughter, / Make plain to them the excellence of killing / And a field where a

thousand corpses lie."
- **Line 26:** "War is kind."

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker uses personification in the second and fourth stanzas, which address the drums and flags of the soldier's regiment as if they had human characteristics. (These stanzas also use the device called apostrophe, which involves addressing things and people who are absent or can't literally respond.)

Lines 6-7 imagine the drums as "Hoarse" (as if they had sore throats from "booming") and as "Little souls who thirst for fight." In this way, the speaker projects the war frenzy of human beings onto military drums, addressing them with a similar (though ironic) passion for war.

Lines 17-22 appeal to the flag in much the same way. Mentioning its "Eagle" design, the speaker addresses the flag as a "Swift, blazing" creature who can convince the soldiers of "the virtue of slaughter," "the excellence of killing," etc. Of course, neither a flag nor an eagle can literally do all this. Again, the speaker is treating something non-human as though it had human capabilities.

Finally, a special kind of personification takes place in lines 10-11, which imagine a "battle-god" whose "kingdom" is the field full of dead soldiers. Many ancient cultures imagined gods that embodied natural or abstract phenomena such as day and night, the seasons, love, and war. In Greek mythology, for example, Ares is the god of war and the decider of battles. Here the speaker is referring to an Ares-like figure—an embodiment of war's destructiveness.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 6-7:** " Hoarse, booming drums of the regiment, / Little souls who thirst for fight,"
- **Lines 10-11:** " Great is the battle-god, great, and his kingdom— / A field where a thousand corpses lie."
- **Lines 17-18:** " Swift, blazing flag of the regiment, / Eagle with crest of red and gold,"
- **Lines 20-21:** " Point for them the virtue of slaughter, / Make plain to them the excellence of killing"

ALLITERATION

The poem uses alliteration at a number of key moments. For example, lines 1, 4-5, 12, 15-16, and 25-26 all place the words "weep" and "war" close to one another. Although the speaker claims that war should *not* cause weeping, the alliteration tells a different story, tracing a repeated link between the two. In a subtle way, it reinforces the poem's message about the sorrows of war.

In lines 8 and 19, the hard /d/ sounds of "drill and die" reinforce the harshness of the image—soldiers training in preparation for their early doom—while also emphasizing the close link between war and death. The repeated guttural /g/ sounds in line 10 ("Great," "god," "great") help get across the speaker's (ironic) insistence and enthusiasm. And in line 13, the sharp, percussive /t/ sounds of "tumbled" and "trenches" roughen the sound of the verse, mirroring the roughness of the dying soldier's "tumble."

In the final stanza, alliteration connects the phrase "whose heart hung humble" and the words "splendid" and "son" (with the similarly sibilant /sh/ of "shroud" in between). Here, the repeated consonant sounds help tie together their respective images (the mother's heart hanging on and the splendidly shrouded son), just as assonance bridges "hung," "humble," and "button." The /h/, /s/, and /sh/ sounds are also soft, gentle consonants that suit the hushed, tender, subdued image of a mother weeping over her son. They may even be reminiscent of sighs and whispers, the kind one hears at a funeral.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "weep," "war"
- **Line 4:** "weep"
- **Line 5:** "War"
- **Line 8:** "drill," "die"
- **Line 10:** "Great," "god," "great"
- **Line 12:** "weep," "war"
- **Line 13:** "tumbled," "trenches"
- **Line 15:** "weep"
- **Line 16:** "War"
- **Line 19:** "drill," "die"
- **Line 23:** "whose heart hung humble"
- **Line 24:** "splendid," "son"
- **Line 25:** "weep"
- **Line 26:** "War"

ASSONANCE

Assonance is used several times in the poem, generally to add emphasis and tie images and phrases together. For example, the repeated long /i/ sounds in "wild," "sky," and "affrighted" in lines 2-3 help unify the elements of a complex image: the wounded soldier's wild gesture, the sky he presumably sees as he falls, and the frightened horse running on without him. The assonance of short /eh/ sounds in "yellow trenches" and "crest of red," meanwhile, links the color-adjectives closely with their nouns, making these images more vivid and emphatic.

The most prominent use of assonance appears in line 23: "Mother whose heart hung humble as a button." Short /uh/ sounds tie together the verb, adjective, and the second noun of the simile, just as alliteration links the verb, adjective, and first noun. These effects make for a crisp, memorable phrase and emphasize an important image in the poem. (The mother's attachment to her son is its strongest, or at least its closing,

evidence against the claim that "war is kind.") Assonance also links the simile to "son" in the next line, as does the imperfect rhyme or eye rhyme of "button"/"son", thereby reinforcing the mother-son connection.

Lastly, the short /uh/ sound in English often appears in words associated with bluntness, coarseness, homeliness, or unpretentiousness. (Think of the word "blunt" itself, or "muck," "dump," "sludge," "grunt," "ugly," etc.) On a subtle level, then, this repeated sound adds to the humbleness of the image.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "wild," "sky"
- **Line 3:** "affrighted"
- **Line 13:** "yellow," "trenches"
- **Line 18:** "crest," "red"
- **Line 23:** "hung humble," "button"
- **Line 24:** "son"

SIMILE

The poem contains just one simile, but it's an important one:

> Mother whose heart hung humble as a button
> On the bright splendid shroud of your son,

Burial shrouds in 19th-century America did sometimes feature "splendid" material and designs. Having died in combat, this soldier was presumably buried with military honors. Perhaps his shroud featured a patriotic design of some kind. Meanwhile, the mother's heart remained *attached* to her shrouded son the way a button remains attached to fabric. It "hung [...] On" to him emotionally.

Her grieving heart was also "humble," by contrast with the gaudy shroud. This contrast suggests the gap between the pomp and ceremony surrounding war and the actual pain and devastation of war. The simile, like the poem as a whole, implies that the one is a myth covering up the reality of the other, much as a burial cloth covers a corpse. The mother's attachment to her dead son may be humble, but in the poem's view, it's much truer than the "bright splendid" myth of glory he's been symbolically wrapped in. It makes the final repetition of "War is kind" that much more painfully ironic: the reader understands that the mother could never swallow this claim.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 23-24:** "Mother whose heart hung humble as a button / On the bright splendid shroud of your son,"

JUXTAPOSITION

Juxtaposition is crucial to the structure of "War Is Kind." The poem alternates between addressing the dead soldier's loved ones and the flag and drums of his regiment, cutting back and forth, so to speak, between home and battlefield.

This juxtaposition allows the poem to show how the battlefield impacts the home—but *not* vice versa. The soldier's death in battle devastates his family, but the family's grief doesn't affect the war in any way. Their personal feelings don't stop the impersonal mass slaughter. Juxtaposition also allows the poem's focus to "zoom in" and "zoom out" in ways that enhance its emotional impact. The reader sees first the individual loss, then the broader context of that loss. As devastating as the soldier's death is, he's only one of thousands dying in the same war. But rather than sticking with this "wide angle" or larger perspective, the poem repeatedly zooms back in, reminding the reader how mass death impacts individuals.

The poem also juxtaposes the speaker's "consolations" with the speaker's glorification of war. The speaker doesn't attempt to convince the grieving family that war is glorious—or mention kindness when addressing the drums and flag. Instead, the emphasis shifts back and forth between false reassurance (after one death) and calls for more "killing" (after a thousand others). This shiftiness makes the speaker all the more untrustworthy.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Lines 2-3
- Lines 6-11
- Line 12
- Lines 13-14
- Lines 17-22
- Lines 23-24

VOCABULARY

Maiden (Line 1) - "Maiden" is an old-fashioned word for a young woman.

Affrighted (Line 3) - "Affrighted" is an old-fashioned word meaning "frightened." The "affrighted steed" is the soldier's horse, which was spooked by whatever gunshot, stabbing, etc. toppled the soldier (or by the general noise of battle), and which galloped on without him.

Steed (Line 3) - A "steed" is a horse, usually a stallion with a rider. It's an old-fashioned word that's often applied to war horses in particular. Here it refers to the dead soldier's horse.

Hoarse (Line 6) - "Hoarse" means husky-sounding, like someone who's sick or thirsty, or who has strained their voice from yelling too much.

Regiment (Line 6, Line 17) - A "regiment" is a large unit of military troops. Its size varies by country and time period. Some regiments, including in the U.S. military, have special flags of the

kind referred to in lines 17-18, with identifying colors and designs.Though it's a noun here, "regiment" can also be a verb meaning "to impose strict, military-style discipline"; "regimented" is an adjective meaning "strictly disciplined." In this context, the word choice is a reminder of the strict military culture that has forced the soldier to "drill and die."

Drill (Line 8, Line 19) - A training exercise for soldiers, involving strict commands and often harsh discipline. To "drill" is to direct or participate in such an exercise.

Battle-god (Line 10) - Many ancient cultures and traditions have a "battle-god" or "war god": a deity that watches over battles and usually determines the outcome. The poem is referring to the general concept rather than a specific deity, but well-known war gods in the European tradition include Ares (Greek mythology) and Mars (Roman mythology).

Babe (Line 12) - "Babe" in line 12 means "infant." This line is referring to the dead soldier's baby—not using a term of endearment for his wife!

Trenches (Line 13) - "Trenches" are systems of deep ditches in which soldiers encamp, shelter from enemy attacks, and fire at the enemy. They were common features of 19th and early 20th century battlefields, including in the American Civil War and World War I. Their use declined after World War I as military technology and strategy evolved.

Shroud (Line 24) - A "shroud" is a burial cloth wrapped around a corpse.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

As one of Crane's experiments in free verse, "War Is Kind" doesn't follow any traditional poetic form. However, it establishes its own highly structured form, full of patterning and repetition. It alternates three stanzas of 4-5 lines each (addressed to the dead soldier's loved ones) with two indented stanzas of 6 lines each (addressed to the drums and flag of the soldier's regiment). This alternating pattern juxtaposes the home front and the battlefield.

The three "home" stanzas all end with the same refrain: "Do not weep. War is kind," and the first two also start with a nearly identical phrase: "Do not weep, [X], for war is kind." Meanwhile, the "battlefield" stanzas rhyme their third and sixth lines: "These men were born to drill and die" and "A field where a thousand corpses lie," respectively.

"War Is Kind" is not a ballad as the form is traditionally defined, but it does incorporate some common features of folk ballads, including the refrain structure, the tragic narrative, the use of apostrophe, and even archaisms such as "maiden" and "babe."

METER

"War Is Kind" is a free verse poem, meaning it doesn't follow a strict meter. In many ways, one could think of "War Is Kind" as intentionally "unpoetic"—a war ballad that satirically overturns the conventions of war ballads, with their emphasis on heroism and glory.

However, lack of regular doesn't mean the poem lacks rhythm! The second and fourth stanzas, for example, feature four (and occasionally five) stressed beats per line. Take lines 8 and 19, both of which read:

> These men were born to drill and die.

Some readers might take that first foot to be "These men," but in any case, there's a clear iambic (da-DUM) march overall here. And note how similar the meters of these stanzas are overall:

> Hoarse, booming drums of the regiment
> Little souls who thirst for fight,
> [...]
> Swift, blazing flag of the regiment,
> Eagle with crest of red and gold,

The similar meters here mirror the fact that these lines are also parallel in their grammar and themes (both deal with military pride and patriotism leading soldiers to war). It makes sense that the meter would become more regular in these stanzas, which describe an inescapable march toward death.

RHYME SCHEME

Most of the poem consists of unrhymed free verse, but rhyme does appear in the second and fourth stanzas. In fact, the same rhyme appears twice over, in one of the poem's many examples of repetition:

> These men were born to drill and die.
> [...]
> A field where a thousand corpses lie.

These lines (8 and 11) repeat almost verbatim as lines 19 and 22 (with an additional "And" in line 22).

The repeated rhyme has several effects:

- First, it places extra emphasis on the words "die" and "lie"—and the phrases "drill and die" and "a thousand corpses lie"—underscoring the catastrophic deadliness of war. (The repetition of "lie" might also evoke the *lie* the speaker is telling about "the virtue of slaughter.")
- Second, it creates a sing-song effect that sounds jarring in connection with the image of "a thousand corpses." This is deliberate: Crane *wants* to jar the

reader, morally speaking.

- Third, it gives the poem a second refrain—"A field where a thousand corpses lie"—that powerfully undermines the first: "Do not weep. / War is kind." How kind could war be, these lines implicitly ask, if it kills so many people?
- Finally, both rhymes and refrains tend to add a sense of closure when they appear at the end of a stanza or poem. Closure seems eerily appropriate in these stanzas, which describe a thousand men marching to their deaths.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "War Is Kind" voices beliefs that are the exact opposite of poet Stephen Crane's. The gap between what the *speaker says* and what the *poet means* creates the irony that dominates the poem.

It also raises interesting interpretive questions. Is the speaker Crane himself, praising war ironically? Or is Crane writing the poem "in persona"—in the voice of a pro-war character he disagrees with? In the first case, the poem's irony would be verbal irony (more specifically, a kind of elaborate sarcasm). In the second case, it would be dramatic irony, meaning that the author and reader know better than the character.

Either interpretation is possible. However, Crane doesn't use persona much in his other poetry, and the speaker lays the irony on thick in ways suggestive of sarcasm ("Great is the battle-god, great"), so verbal irony seems a bit more likely.

Throughout the poem, the speaker alternates between comforting the soldier's grieving family in ridiculous fashion (claiming bizarrely that "war is kind," then offering evidence that shows the opposite) and praising war's violence in equally ridiculous fashion (addressing inanimate objects, celebrating a field full of dead bodies). If the speaker's words are taken at face value, they come off as insensitive, bloodthirsty, and slightly unhinged—not the kind of figure you'd trust to evaluate the merits of war! If the speaker's words are taken ironically, they express a bitter and barely disguised condemnation of war. Either way, they voice the *poet's* anti-war stance.

SETTING

The poem alternates between two wartime settings: the home front and the battlefield.

The first, third, and fifth stanzas address the dead soldier's loved ones: his wife (or lover), baby, and mother. They are grieving, apparently "weep[ing]," over his death, having recently buried him. Meanwhile, the second and fourth stanzas take us to the "field" where his regiment continues to fight and die in large numbers.

As a statement against war in general, the poem doesn't specify which war or battlefield it's referring to. However, Crane was an American writer, and the "Eagle" flag suggests American participation, or even an American setting. Both the "trenches" and the field full of mass casualties ("a thousand corpses") were typical of the Civil War that Crane had famously written about in *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895). Crane also observed the first Greco-Turkish War (1897) and the Spanish-American War (1898) as a journalist, but these were shorter conflicts with much lower death tolls. The Spanish-American War featured some trench warfare, but it was not as extensive as in the Civil War, and combat fatalities in that conflict were few compared to fatalities from disease.

In short, the setting Crane sketches in the poem was most likely inspired by the brutal battlefields of the Civil War, though he may also have drawn on his observation of other conflicts. At the same time, he keeps the details generalized enough to transcend the context of a specific event: he's not protesting *a* war, he's protesting *all* war.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Stephen Crane published "War Is Kind" in 1899 as the opening poem of the volume *War Is Kind*. (The poem is actually untitled, but since it contains the volume's title phrase, it's sometimes referred to by that title. Other sources refer to it by its opening line instead.) *War Is Kind* was Crane's second collection of experimental free verse, following *The Black Riders and Other Lines* (1895).

In Crane's era, free verse—defined by the absence of regular meter and rhyme—was still uncommon in English-language poetry. Walt Whitman (1819-1892) gained fame in the mid-1800s with his free verse collection *Leaves of Grass*, but by the last decade of the century, few American or UK poets had followed the trail he'd blazed. During the years between Whitman's death and the rise of Modernism in the early 20th century, Crane was virtually the only major poet writing free verse in English.

Crane's poetry often features terse sentences (*e.g.*, "Do not weep. War is kind."), a flat tone, and heavy irony. At times he seems to make his verse deliberately "unbeautiful" in order to paint a tough, realistic picture of life. This method aligns with the aims of his fiction, including the war novel *The Red Badge of Courage* and short stories such as "The Open Boat." Critics have described these as works of "Realism" and "Naturalism," in contrast with the "Romanticism" that dominated the arts in 19th-century America and Europe.

Unlike Romantic literature—which favored lyricism, flights of imagination, and "sublime" encounters with the natural

world—Realist and Naturalist literature favored detachment, gritty detail, plain language, and a skeptical outlook. Often it deflated uplifting myths about nature, religion, and society. For example, "War Is Kind" attacks the ideals of martial "glory" and "virtue" that are often used to justify war. *The Red Badge of Courage* also challenges ideals of war heroism by exploring fear and shame as elements of combat experience. Other writers sometimes labeled Naturalists or Realists include Jack London, Mark Twain, and the French novelist Émile Zola.

Sadly, Crane didn't have much time to develop his literary innovations. A tuberculosis sufferer before TB was curable, he died at age 28 in 1900, a year after publishing *War Is Kind*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Crane lived and wrote during the period after the American Civil War (1860-1865), an event that cast a long shadow over his work. His most successful book was, and remains, the Civil War novel *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895). Though he was born after the war's end and wrote the novel without having seen war firsthand, his battlefield scenes drew praise for their realism. Later, he witnessed the Greco-Turkish War (1897) and Spanish-American War (1898) as a journalist. By the time he published *War Is Kind* in 1899, he had spent the better part of a decade researching, imagining, observing, and reporting on war.

Some of his observation took place literally "in the trenches." This excerpt of his reportage during the Spanish-American War gives a flavor of the things he experienced:

> The noise; the impenetrable darkness; the knowledge from the sound of the bullets that the enemy was on three sides of the camp; the infrequent bloody stumbling and death of some man with whom, perhaps, one had messed two hours previous; the weariness of the body, and the more terrible weariness of the mind, at the endlessness of the thing, made it wonderful that at least some of the men did not come out of it with their nerves hopelessly in shreds.

Though Crane's correspondence during this conflict contained some praise of the U.S. military, the publication of *War Is Kind* a year later suggests that his private attitude toward war was deeply hostile. In general, his writing on the subject combines sympathy toward ordinary soldiers with horror at the cruelties of warfare.

Crane also wrote during a period of U.S. history known as the "Progressive Era," a backlash against the excesses and inequalities of the "Gilded Age." Stretching from the mid-1890s through World War I, the Progressive Era nurtured a variety of protest and reform movements, including pro-union, anti-monopoly, temperance, and women's suffrage campaigns. Many progressive reformers also opposed U.S. militarism and imperialism—exemplified by the Spanish-American War—as well as the sensationalist ("yellow") journalism that stirred up war fever. Some of these political concerns inform Crane's poetry and fiction, from his social realist novel *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (which addresses poverty, alcoholism, and prostitution) to *War Is Kind* (which includes criticisms of war, excess wealth, and newspaper journalism).

Then again, much of Crane's poetry embodies a cosmic pessimism rather than a spirit of reform. This stance might reflect the broader troubles of his age—or his personal outlook as a sufferer of tuberculosis, which was a terminal illness back then. By the time he wrote "War Is Kind," he may have known he wouldn't live to see much social progress.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to a reading of "War Is Kind" on YouTube. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a3w1c0cgZBI)
- The Poem's Original Context — Read the full text of the book War Is Kind, with illustrations from the period, at Project Gutenberg. (https://www.gutenberg.org/files/9870/9870-h/9870-h.htm)
- The Poet's Papers — Check out the Stephen Crane Collection, an archive of Crane papers and memorabilia, at Syracuse University. (https://library.syr.edu/digital/guides/c/crane_s.htm)
- More on War by Crane — Read the Project Gutenberg e-text of The Red Badge of Courage, Crane's famous novel about the American Civil War. (http://www.gutenberg.org/files/73/73-h/73-h.htm)
- Biography of the Poet — Read about Stephen Crane's life and work at Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/stephen-crane)

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