



A-level

ENGLISH LITERATURE A

Paper 2A Texts in shared contexts: WW1 and its aftermath

June 2023

Insert

Extract from *The Forbidden Zone* by Mary Borden, published in 1929

The Regiment

A regiment was marching along the high road towards the town. In the distance, looking towards Belgium, you could see it coming down the white road. It was a shadow moving across the bright surface of the country against the wind and against the shadows of the clouds. It looked like the shadow of a snake.

There was, however, no snake visible in the lovely sky, and on a nearer view the shadow became a column of hunchbacks, a herd of deformed creatures driven on together, each one like another one.

It was a French territorial regiment. It had come out of the trenches that morning, and from the trenches it was marching toward the town.

It was a moving mass of men covered over with the cloth of fatigue. Over them was their suffocating weariness, and under them was the dust of the road. They moved along, bending forward as if the space between the weight that lay on them and the dusty road under them was not wide enough to hold them upright. They moved laboriously through the dust, as if they were dragging chains. But there was no sound from them save the dull sound of their feet tramping the road.

The regiment was a regiment of old men. Their faces were old and their clothes were old and their bodies were old, and the spirit in them was old. There was no youth in any one of them.

They marched steadily along the road. Their gait was the steady jolting gait of weary animals. They did not look quite like men. One could not be certain what kind of men they were. One could only be certain that they were not young. They had not quite the colour nor the shape of men. The war had spread over them its own colour. They were dark against the bright mirage of summer. They were of a deep, dull courageous hue. Their faces and their hands and their coats were all stained with the same stain, no longer blue, no longer brown. Fatigue and suffering and dirt had soaked through them and had made them this colour.

And they were all deformed, and certainly their deformity was the deformity of the war. They were not misshapen in different ways. They were all misshapen in the same way. Each one was deformed like the next one. Each one had been twisted and bent in the same way. Each one carried the same burden that bowed his back, the same knapsack, the same roll of blanket, the same flask, the same dangling box, the same gun. Each one dragged swollen feet in the same thick-cruled boots. The same machine had twisted and bent them all. They did not look quite like men, and yet they were men.

Nor did they behave like men. They did not look about them as they marched along the road. They did not talk as they marched close together. They did not stop marching, never for a moment did they stop marching. They did not shift their burdens to ease them. They did not notice the milestones as they passed. They paid no attention to the signposts at the cross roads. They did not wipe the sweat off their faces. They did not behave like men walking through pleasant country, and yet they assuredly were men.

I saw in their eyes that they were men. They marched with their eyes fixed on the rough bent backs of those in front, on the rough backs of their companions who were too old to be comrades. And in their deep fixed eyes, sunk under grizzled eyebrows, there was a strange expression, the expression of profound knowledge. They were old men and they knew. There were many things they did not know; they did not know where they were going; they did not know why they were going there; they did not know how far they had to go, or how long they would rest there; but two things they did know; they knew that they were not going home, and they knew that they were condemned to death. They knew this; they had always known. They understood and they did not complain. France was at war. They were old men. Their sons had been killed. They were taking the place of their sons.

There was no elasticity in them, nor any enthusiasm, nor any passion; but they were patient. Being old men, there was nothing they could not accept; there was nothing they could not endure. They had endured fatigue and cold and hunger and wet. They had endured so long that they had ceased to think about these things. Their weariness was a thing of such long standing that they thought of it no more. Their uncleanness had become a habit to them. Suffering was a part of their rations. They were acclimatised to misery. Death was a part of the equipment they carried always

with them. The war had no interest for them nor any terror. They accepted the war. It was a thing to be endured. They were enduring it.

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