



A-level ENGLISH LITERATURE A

Paper 2A Texts in shared contexts: WW1 and its aftermath
June 2017

Insert

Extract from *We that Were Young* by Irene Rathbone, published in 1932.

JULY in England. From the Somme battle-fields the convoys of wounded poured into the hospitals. Every bed was full, new wards were being erected, nurses were rushed off their feet, and Joan had enough work at last. She had been sent, at four days' notice, to the 1st London General, Camberwell, and although she had hoped it might be abroad—Egypt or France—she was thankful to be in any military hospital at all.

VAD's all over the country, whether they had had much, or little, or no training were being called up. From their homes, from their local hospitals, they were flung suddenly into gigantic wards where they had to rise as best they could to the varied and strenuous demands made on them. Whereas hitherto they had been taken in dozens, they were now being taken in hundreds—it seemed almost impossible to obtain a sufficient number; and when there actually appeared an article in *The Times* on the subject, the middle-class, home-sheltered girls of England felt, at last, that their existence was not wholly futile. How different from being merely 'allowed to do things' was the fact of being definitely asked to come and do them. They were in the same position as their brothers now: needed by the country.

In Joan's ward there were forty beds, and almost every patient was seriously wounded. She had never seen anything like the wounds. Many had to be dressed three times a day. It had been one thing to amble in and out of the cosy little wards at the Hampstead hospital, carrying meals, doing housework, and even assisting at the mild dressings; it was quite another here, in Ward 33 of the 1st London General, to see limbs which shrapnel had torn about and swollen into abnormal shapes, from which yellow pus poured when the bandages were removed, which were caked with brown blood, and in whose gangrenous flesh loose bits of bone had to be sought for painfully with probes.

Every night during the first week Joan dreamt about the wounds, saw them floating before her eyes, almost had the stench of them in her nostrils. It was inevitable this should be so, for, during the day, sensibilities had to be hardened, quivering disgust controlled, and head and hand kept steady for the sake of the sufferers themselves. With unconscious wisdom she let down a sort of safety-curtain between her mind and the sights before her, keeping them at bay, preventing their full significance from penetrating. If she had not done so she would have been useless. The nights were reactions from this discipline, and the safety-curtain no longer functioning, the horror rushed in on her in the shape of dreams.

But after the first week she no longer even dreamed. She had adjusted herself inwardly and outwardly to the conditions in which her life must now be lived—conditions which, if they could not be accepted as normal, would mean her defeat. And in the face of the gay endurance, the positively worshipful spirit of the wounded, how was it possible not to give of one's very best?

A fervent emotion—whether towards a person, a country, or a cause—may be able to express itself in a poem, or at any rate some form of words. Happy if it can. But it may also have to be expressed in ways more indirect, and less glowingly satisfactory. Joan's feeling of almost weeping admiration for the men had to show itself in the severest practical form—and this was not easy for her. Mentally she was on her knees to them; actually she was on her feet twelve hours a day, sweeping, washing, bed-making, moving down one long line of iron bedsteads and up another with the wheeled table on which were the appliances for the dressings. It was her pride, while getting ready this table in the morning, not to forget one single necessary article. She learnt them by heart, as she might a poem, and with a corresponding fervour. And though for the first few repetitions she occasionally forgot a line she was soon word-perfect.

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