

Activity 3: Siegfried Sassoon - Aftermath

Siegfried Sassoon was commissioned into the Royal Welsh Fusiliers in May 1915 and went to France, fighting in the Battle of the Somme at Mametz Wood. He survived the war and died in September 1967.

Siegfried Sassoon - Aftermath

HAVE you forgotten yet? ...

For the world's events have rumbled on since those gagged days,
Like traffic checked a while at the crossing of city ways:
And the haunted gap in your mind has filled with thoughts that flow
Like clouds in the lit heavens of life; and you're a man reprieved to go,
Taking your peaceful share of Time, with joy to spare.
But the past is just the same - and War's a bloody game...

Have you forgotten yet? ...

Look down, and swear by the slain of the War that you'll never forget.

Do you remember the dark months you held the sector at Mametz -
The nights you watched and wired and dug and piled sandbags on parapets?
Do you remember the rats; and the stench
Of corpses rotting in front of the front-line trench -
And dawn coming, dirty-white, and chill with a hopeless rain?
Do you ever stop and ask, 'Is it all going to happen again?'

Do you remember that hour of din before the attack -
And the anger, the blind compassion that seized and shook you then
As you peered at the doomed and haggard faces of your men?

Do you remember the stretcher-cases lurching back
With dying eyes and lolling heads - those ashen-gray
Masks of the lads who once were keen and kind and gay?

Have you forgotten yet? ...

Look up, and swear by the slain of the war that you'll never forget!

Every word counts in a poem. The title of Sassoon's poem, **Aftermath**, is particularly significant, due to its multiple meanings.

aftermath, n.

1. A second crop or new growth of grass after the first has been mown or harvested.
2. A period or state of affairs following a significant event, esp. when the event is destructive or harmful.
3. A (usually undesired) thing remaining or left after the end or exit of something; an unwelcome consequence or effect.

Although most people's immediate interpretation of the title is often based around definition 2, thinking about the other two definitions bring new meaning to the poem.

- 3. A (usually undesired) thing remaining or left after the end or exit of something; an unwelcome consequence or effect.**

And **the haunted gap** in your mind has filled with thoughts that flow
[...]
Do you remember the rats; and the stench
Of corpses rotting in front of the front-line trench

In the phrase "haunted gap" and his use of graphic imagery, Sassoon alludes in the poem to shell shock, now known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, which he, and many others, suffered during the war. With definition 3 in mind, the title *Aftermath* could also be a reference to PTSD, an "unwelcome effect" of the war.

- 1. A second crop or new growth of grass after the first has been mown or harvested.**

For the world's events have rumbled on since those gagged days,
Like traffic checked a while at the crossing of city ways:
[...]
Do you ever stop and ask, 'Is it all going to happen again?'

Definition 1 implies a form of rebirth – new grass coming up to replace the old, new men growing up to replace the ones who were lost in the war. Sassoon writes that the world's events have just gone on, as if the war had just been a momentary pause in traffic, and implies that it's all going to happen again.

Sassoon didn't know this at the time of writing the poem, but this interpretation is especially moving in this poem, as those children born at the end of World War One grew up to fight in another war – World War Two – just 20 years later.

Looking at all three definitions, the poem's title *Aftermath* begins to take on several different layers, helping to convey different ideas of Sassoon's experience of the war and how he remembers it.

During the Live Lesson, you'll be asked to come up with a single short sentence, beginning with the words 'I remember...', reflecting on something that you've learnt or thought about in this Live Lesson.

Imagine that you could send this one detail about the day into the future for people to read long after you've all gone. Use the space below to write down your sentence.

I remember...

Send your ideas to live.lessons@bbc.co.uk, or by using the hashtag #bbclivelessons, and you could see them featured on our Live Lesson on the 30th of June.