

Unseen extract 5: *Birdsong*

Read the extract carefully. It is taken from *Birdsong* by Sebastian Faulks, first published in 1993, a novel which tells the story of a British man called Stephen Wraysford at different stages of his life both before and during World War I. In this extract, the first day of the Battle of the Somme is described through the eyes of Stephen, who is now a lieutenant in the British Army.

Sample question

Read the extract carefully. Explore the significance of slaughter in this extract.

Remember to include in your answer relevant detailed analysis of the ways that Faulks shapes meanings.

Extract

The second hand of his watch in slow motion. Twenty-nine past. The whistle in his mouth. His foot on the ladder. He swallowed hard and blew.

He clambered out and looked around him. It was for a moment completely quiet as the bombardment ended and the German guns also stopped. Skylarks wheeled and sang high in the cloudless sky. He felt alone, as though he had stumbled on this fresh world at the instant of its creation.

Then the artillery began to lay down the first barrage and the German machine guns resumed. To his left Stephen saw men trying to emerge from the trench but being smashed by bullets before they could stand. The gaps in the wire became jammed with bodies. Behind him the men were coming up. He saw Gray run along the top of the trench, shouting encouragement.

He walked hesitatingly forward, his skin tensed for the feeling of metal tearing flesh. He turned his body sideways, tenderly, to protect his eyes. He was hunched like an old woman in the cocoon of tearing noise.

Byrne was walking beside him at the slow pace required by their orders. Stephen glanced to his right. He could see a long, wavering line of khaki, primitive dolls progressing in tense deliberate steps, going down with a silent flap of arms, replaced, falling, continuing as though walking into a gale. He tried to catch Byrne's eye but failed. The sound of machine guns was varied by the crack of snipers and the roar of the barrage ahead of them.

He saw Hunt fall to his right. Studd bent to help him and Stephen saw his head opening up bright red under machine gun bullets as his helmet fell away.

His feet pressed onwards gingerly over the broken ground. After twenty or thirty yards there came a feeling that he was floating above his body, that it had taken on an automatic life of its own over which he had no power. It was as though he had become detached, in a dream, from the metal air through which his flesh was walking. In this trance there was a kind of relief, something close to hilarity.

Ten yards ahead and to the right was Colonel Barclay. He was carrying a sword.

Stephen went down. Some force had blown him. He was in a dip in the ground with a bleeding man, shivering. The barrage was too far ahead. Now the German guns were placing a curtain of their own. Shrapnel was blasting its jagged cones through any air space not filled by the machine guns.

All that metal will not find room enough, Stephen thought. It must crash and strike sparks above them. The man with him was screaming inaudibly. Stephen wrapped his dressing round the man's leg, then looked at himself. There was no wound. He crawled to the rim of the shellhole. There were others ahead of him. He stood up and began to walk again.

Perhaps with them he would be safer. He felt nothing as he crossed the pitted land on which humps of khaki lay every few yards. The load on his back was heavy. He looked behind and saw a second line walking into the barrage in no man's land. They were hurled up like waves breaking backwards into the sea. Bodies were starting to pile and clog the progress.

There was a man beside him missing part of his face, but walking in the same dreamlike state, his rifle pressing forward. His nose dangled and Stephen could see his teeth through the missing cheek. The noise was unlike anything he had heard before. It lay against his skin, shaking his bones. Remembering his order not to stop for those behind him, he pressed slowly on, and as the smoke lifted in front of him he saw the German wire.

It had not been cut. Men were running up and down it in turmoil, looking for a way through. They were caught in the coils where they brought down torrents of machine gun fire. Their bodies jerked up and down, twisting and jumping. Still they tried. Two men were clipping vainly with their cutters among the corpses, their movement bringing the sharp disdainful fire of a sniper. They lay still.

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