



A-level

ENGLISH LITERATURE A

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

June 2022

Insert

Extract from *Wake* by Anna Hope, published in 2014

'Safe?' her son spat. 'There's nothing safe. There's no such thing, is there? Not for anyone, not any more.'

She went inside, sat down and held her shaking hands in her lap.

He was right.

And she knew then it was coming. That it was coming for them all. It was like the Bible, the stories she remembered from childhood, as though an order had been issued for all the boys to be killed.

The autumn came, and the days began to shorten, and conscription began to take hold. She began to pray then, something she hadn't done in years. She prayed selfishly, frantically, for herself, for Michael, for the war to stop at her door. She didn't know who she was praying to, didn't know who was more powerful: a distant God, who may or may not be listening; the hungry war itself, growling just beyond the gates; or Kitchener, his weather-faded face half covered over by adverts for Ovaltine and cigarettes, but his finger still pointing, still accusing from beyond the grave.

Michael's birthday was 20 February 1917. The recruiting letter came in the first week of March.

The night before he left for France, when he had finished his training and was home at the end of a week's leave, she knocked on the door of his room. He was packing the last of his things, his big bag and greatcoat already waiting in the hall. He had his haversack open in the middle of the floor and laid out around him in a fan shape were bits of his kit. She walked around the neat half-circle he had made. Toothbrush, soap and small towel, two spare bootlaces, mess tin, fork and spoon. The window was open and pale sunshine was filling the room. He looked up at her, squinting in the light. 'You inspecting me, Mum?'

'Might be.'

He sat back on his heels. 'Proper sergeant major, you are.'

She crouched down beside him and picked up a small sewing kit, turning it round in her hands. 'They teach you to use this, then?'

'Just a bit.'

She put it back in its place on the floor, went over and sat on the bed, watching her son. He was stronger-looking than when he'd left for his training. The soft, changing shapes of his boyhood were settling, the lines emerging of the man he would become. She watched his head as it bent and dipped, his long narrow back, the sunburned skin moving across the bone at the top of his spine. There was something hanging from his neck. 'What's that?' she asked, pointing.

He looked up at her, and then followed her gaze down. 'It's my tag.'

'Can I see?'

He brought it out of his shirtfront, stood up and came over to her. 'That's my name,' he said, pointing at the brown fibre disc. 'My regiment there. And my number.'

She stared at the number. Six digits. His pulse in the vein beside it, keeping time. Her son.

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