



A-level

ENGLISH LITERATURE A

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

June 2019

Insert

Extract from *The Blasphemer* by Nigel Farndale, published in 2010

'Fix bayonets!' the CSM orders in a rising growl.

There is a scrape of steel along the trench. Andrew's hands are shaking again and it takes him several attempts to align the hilt of his bayonet to the rifle's lug. He leans forward on to his rifle to set the weapon firmly and give it a quarter turn. His eyes close. When he opens them again he sees a rat squatting behind an ammunition crate. He stares at it. It stares back, its eyes two black beads. It runs a paw over its snout, as if scratching an itch. Andrew closes his eyes again. He can taste vomit in his mouth. He spits it out and opens his eyes. The rat has gone.

'Put one up!'

Bolts are drawn back and .303 bullets loaded into Lee-Enfield chambers. Andrew presses his back teeth together to stop them chattering and, quite unexpectedly, gravity falls upon him.

I'm not going to let the CSM down. I'm not going to let Dorothy down. I'm not going to let Will down.

He holds out his hand towards Macintyre. It is no longer trembling.

Macintyre takes it in his and presses it hard. Comrades shaking hands. 'When we go over, Andy...'

'What?'

'Try not to trip me up with your big clumsy feet.'

Andrew manages a smile. If this is to be the hour of his death, he thinks, he will meet it with a steady eye. Like a man. Like a soldier. He feels the heat of the rum and, with it, a surge of adrenalin. A new bombardment begins. It is more nerve-jarring than previous ones and so heavy the air liquefies – a heavy liquid, dense and metallic. Andrew tries to imagine he is back at home in Shropshire, caught in a lightning storm. He also tries to count the gaps between the flashes and the rolls of thunder like he did as a child, but the explosions are so loud he is unable to get beyond three – so loud that for one moment he cannot even recall his own name. Private something. Kennedy. Private Andrew Kennedy, 11th Battalion, Shropshire Fusiliers. There are no gaps in the thunder now anyway. It is rolling in unbroken waves. And the displacement of air caused by the shells overhead catches the whole of the line in a hurricane. At every report Andrew feels as if his scalp is being removed. Under his boots the earth is shuddering, ecstatic tremors that carry up his legs. In his confusion he imagines he sees the top of the parapet moving. It is only the terrified rats fleeing. They have become hysterical. Andrew looks at Macintyre and realizes what he feels for his old friend, at this minute, on this day, is something approaching love. Something beyond love. Macintyre shouts at him but his words are drowned out. Andrew can see his friend's lips move and tries to shout back but he cannot hear himself. He wants to tell Macintyre that they will keep together. Instead, he grabs his hand again. They will go over the top hand in hand, as they had gone to Sunday school. Andrew watches the subaltern stand on a firestep, a Webley revolver in one hand and a whistle in the other. He watches the whistle reach the officer's lips and his cheeks puff out as he blows. But he does not hear the sound. Others do and begin scrambling up the ladders. As Andrew follows them, still holding Macintyre's hand, the weight of his kitbag almost pulls him backwards. Then it comes to him: anger. He hears a voice saying: '*Shit, shit, shit.*' The word is repeated again and again. He realizes it is rising from his own throat, increasing in volume until it turns into a shouted noise, a battle cry. They are all doing it, hundreds of them along the line as they scale the ladders. They are swearing to give themselves courage, as they have been trained. Dogs responding to a whistle.

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