



**2015 specification**  
first exams in 2017 (2016 for AS)

# ***Strange Meeting***

Comprehensive Guide  
for A Level AQA

[zigzageducation.co.uk](http://zigzageducation.co.uk)

**POD**  
**10350**

Publish your own work... Write to a brief...  
Register at [publishmenow.co.uk](http://publishmenow.co.uk)

Follow us on Twitter [@ZigZagEng](https://twitter.com/ZigZagEng)

# Contents

<b>Product Support from ZigZag Education</b> .....	<b>ii</b>
<b>Terms and Conditions of Use</b> .....	<b>iii</b>
<b>Teacher’s Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
General Learning Aims for Students .....	2
<b>Background on the Author</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Background on the Text</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Critical Reception</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Plot Summary</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>Part One: Summary and Analysis</b> .....	<b>8</b>
Pages 2–28 .....	8
Pages 28–64 .....	12
<b>Part Two: Summary and Analysis</b> .....	<b>15</b>
Pages 65–85 .....	15
Pages 85–117 .....	18
<b>Part Three: Summary and Analysis</b> .....	<b>20</b>
Pages 118–141 .....	20
Pages 141–165 .....	23
<b>Character Analysis</b> .....	<b>26</b>
<b>Whole-text Analysis</b> .....	<b>26</b>
Characterisation (AO1).....	26
Relationships (AO1).....	30
Genre (AO3).....	32
Themes (AO1).....	33
Attitudes and Values (AO3).....	35
The Writer’s Use of Language (AO2).....	37
Form (AO2).....	40
Structure (AO2).....	41
Contextual Analysis (AO3).....	42
Literary Approaches (AO5).....	45
<b>Glossary of Terms</b> .....	<b>49</b>
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	<b>51</b>
<b>Answers</b> .....	<b>52</b>
Part One .....	52
Part Two .....	53
Part Three.....	54
Whole-text Analysis .....	55

# Teacher's Introduction

## How to use this study guide

This comprehensive resource is intended to help teachers and students with their reading and critical understanding of *Strange Meeting* by Susan Hill. It has been designed in conjunction with the academic requirements for the AQA English Literature A specification 'Texts in shared contexts', in which *Strange Meeting* can be studied in accordance with Option 2A: 'WW1 and its aftermath'. The resource will include plot summaries which will aid students in their understanding of the characters and main themes of the novel.

The resource also includes activities and discussion topics for group work, as well as directions for further reading to assist student revision. Activities for students include close reading for textual analysis, further reading suggestions, research activity on the novel's historical context, and practice essay and exam questions comparing the novel to others in the AQA A specification's 'WW1 and its aftermath' component. Please note that the extended essay questions in the resource are designed to consolidate students' knowledge and understanding of the novel while improving essay-writing skills, and do not reflect the questions that students will encounter in the exam.

All activities requiring internet access will be denoted by this symbol.



## ***Strange Meeting* and the AQA English Literature A specification 'Texts in shared contexts'**

In *Strange Meeting*, Hill explores the vastly different perspectives on World War One of those serving on the front line, and those following events from home. This provides a context for exploring the experience of the war, a context primarily developed through the central relationship of Hilliard and Barton, and their families' correspondences. The strong sense of love and kinship that develops between the pair is the novel's central relationship, and the sense of belonging that Barton's descriptions of his home and family creates in Hilliard after the other man's death, challenges Hilliard's sense of alienation at the prospect of returning home. In tandem with its success as a searing critique of the inhumane conditions and tactical errors that characterised life on the front line of World War I, *Strange Meeting* offers an often poignant portrayal of the primary importance of love, friendship and memory in allowing people to live through and beyond the most traumatic of experiences.

March 2020

The edition of the text used for this resource is: Susan Hill, *Strange Meeting* (Harlow: Longman, 1984). (ISBN: 0 582 22361 X)

## General Learning Aims for Students

This section is included to inform teachers of the aims of the learning resource.

- To aid creative academic responses to literary texts, and develop knowledge
- To analyse ways in which meanings are shaped in literary texts through language
- To understand the importance of historical and cultural contexts to the creation of the responses to texts by readers over time
- To explore constructive comparisons between literary texts and how they relate to each other

Table 1: Assessment objectives coverage

Key Features	AO1	AO2	AO3
Chapter analysis	✓	✓	
Main characters	✓		
Themes	✓		
Character relationships			
Linguistic techniques		✓	
Genre			✓
Background on text			✓
Context			✓
Critical reception			
Literary approaches			

### Assessment Objectives

The Assessment Objectives set by *Ofqual* apply to all AS and A-level English Literature across all exam boards. Exams and class assessments will determine how successfully students meet these objectives.

- AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using relevant terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.
- AO2: Analyse ways in which meanings are shaped in literary texts.
- AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the context of literary texts and of the ways in which written and received.
- AO4: Explore connections across literary texts.
- AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.

### AQA A: Method of Assessment

#### Paper 2 (Specification: Texts in shared contexts)

There is the choice of two options, based on the study of three texts: one prose, one drama and one poetry text. One of the texts must have been written post-2000.

- Option 2A: WW1 and its aftermath
- Option 2B: Modern times: literature from 1945 to the present day.

The examination will include an unseen prose extract.

- written response
- 2 hours 30 minutes
- open book
- 75 marks
- 40% of A-level

### Exam questions

Section A: Set texts. One essay question on set text (25 marks)

Section B: Contextual linking

- one compulsory question on an unseen extract (25 marks)
- one essay question linking two texts (25 marks)

All  
 written  
 in  
 s  
 a

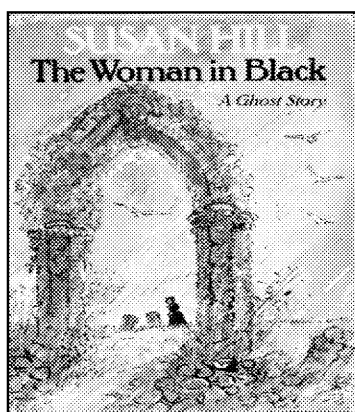
**COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED**



## Background on the Author

On February 5<sup>th</sup> 1942, on a cold winter's day during World War II, Susan Hill was born in the seaside town of Scarborough, North Yorkshire. She attended Scarborough Convent Grammar School before moving to Coventry, where she completed her A Levels. From there Hill moved to London to attend King's College London, a well-respected institution that has produced a number of distinguished names in literature, John Keats, Thomas Hardy, and Virginia Woolf among them. She graduated in 1963 with a degree in English.

Her literary career began in 1961 during her first year as a student, when Hutchinson & Co. published *The Enclosure*, a novel she had written when she was just 15. Two years later Hutchinson published her second novel, *Do Me a Favour*. Hill described her first two published novels disparagingly, but appreciated the future opportunity that getting into print created. Since then, Hill has been a prolific writer, publishing dozens of novels, children's books, short stories, as well as several non-fiction books. Her name, however, is primarily associated with the horror genre, with many of her novels featuring Gothic and supernatural elements. More recently Hill has focused on crime novels, releasing many books based on the character of Detective Simon S



Hill's most famous novel is *The Woman in Black* featuring a spectral haunting of a small English town. The play was adapted for the stage by Stephen Mallatratt in 1987 and was first performed at the National Theatre in London in 1989. The adaptation proved to be a huge success, running for over 20 years. The play has also been adapted for radio, television, and film, with a film starring Daniel Radcliffe as Arthur Kipps.

Though Hill's other novels might not have achieved the runaway success of *The Woman in Black*, she is a respected writer who often receives critical praise for her works. She has won numerous awards, including the Whitbread, the W Somerset Maugham Award, and the John Llewellyn Prize, as well as receiving a nomination for the Booker Prize. Aside from writing, Hill is a regular reviewer of fiction for radio and print, and also has her own publishing company, Barn Books, which publishes a quarterly literary journal.

In 1975 Hill married Stanley Wells, the prominent Shakespeare scholar. Together they have two adult daughters, one of whom, Jessica, is a novelist like her mother. Hill has lived in numerous towns and cities throughout England, and moved to North Northamptonshire in 2013, where she continues to write.

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED

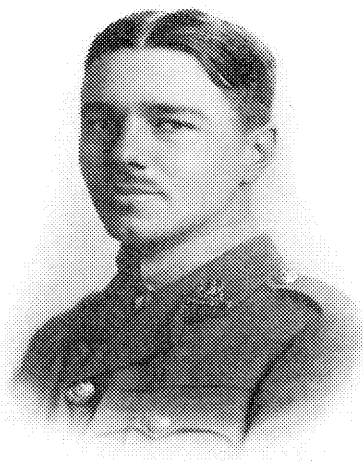


## Background on the Text

In the afterword to the novel<sup>1</sup> Hill explains that the seed for *Strange Meeting* was a performance of Benjamin Britten's *War Requiem*<sup>2</sup> many years earlier. Britten's Latin text with the poetry of Wilfred Owen and constitutes a powerful anti-war statement.

Hill's desire became a reality in 1971, when *Strange Meeting* was published by Hamish Hamilton. Like her other early novels, *Strange Meeting* was released with much fanfare and was by no means a bestseller. It was, however, well received and respected by literary critics. Mary Jane Reed, writing for *The English Journal*, applauded the novel's 'masterful probe into human emotions and needs' and described it as 'easy to read yet profound in exploring our complex behaviour and the universal problems we encounter'<sup>3</sup>.

Hill adopted the title for her novel from the Wilfred Owen poem of the same name which had featured in Britten's *Requiem*<sup>4</sup>. Owen's 'Strange Meeting' is between two enemy soldiers who are reunited in hell after battle. Containing Owen's signature anti-war message – that hell is preferable to the battlefield –, the poem seeks to humanise the soldiers who have been so damaged by war. Hill's use of the title is apt: while different in their form, both texts demonstrate the horrors and futility of war, and the possibilities for friendship that remain nonetheless; between enemies in Owen's poem, or fellow soldiers in Hill's novel. Hill stated in her afterword that she had hoped the novel would communicate the possibilities of human love as much as the horrors of war.



Wilfred Owen

Contextual Information (105)  
Further Reading

Wilfred Owen's poem 'Strange Meeting' can be read online at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47393>

<sup>1</sup> The afterword does not appear in all editions of the text.  
<sup>2</sup> A 'requiem' is a Catholic Mass which celebrates the dead. They have frequently been adapted for secular purposes. Britten composed *War Requiem* in 1961 and it was premiered in 1962.  
<sup>3</sup> Mary Jane Reed, 'Recommended: Susan Hill', *The English Journal*, 72: 4 (1983) pp. 75–76 (p. 75).  
<sup>4</sup> The full text of Owen's poem is available at < <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47393> >

## Critical Reception

There is a shortage of critical work devoted to *Strange Meeting*. However, some interesting perspectives on the novel.

An anonymous piece dating from March 1972 in *Saturday Review* pays particular attention to Hill's narrative style, 'a meticulous, quiet, almost letter-perfect exactitude which corrects the encroaches'.<sup>5</sup> The writer also notes the 'interval[s] in time' that characterise the novel, particularly in the immediate aftermath of Hilliard's leg injury and subsequent amputation.

Writing on Hill's novels generally, K R Ireland<sup>6</sup> observes that Hill's novels 'explore the possibilities of narrative which in the case of *Strange Meeting* is that of 'female to male intimacy'.<sup>7</sup> The suggestive pattern of developing central character relationships around often contrasting emotions is a feature which she attempts to condense the experience of World War I through Barton and Hilliard.

Recent criticism of the novel includes the use of cultural theory and a focus on war-time relationships. The novel has been considered as a homosexual one. Shakespeare scholar Elizabeth Witherell has written a novel from a feminist perspective, relating its central relationship to a tendency to explore ambiguous relationships between male characters, whether sexually or otherwise.

*From the devotion of friendship to homosexual attraction, some of the most commonly depicted by women are those which explore the range of possibilities between the two.*

This perhaps offers a good starting point for considering the ambiguity in Hilliard's relationship with Barton, how it manifests itself, and how it can be contextualised with the wartime setting.<sup>9</sup> However, in her afterword to her novel, expressing her viewpoint that Hilliard and Barton's love was not considered sexual.

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED



<sup>5</sup> Anon., 'Kirkus Review', *Saturday Review Press* <<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/>> retrieved 21.10.19

<sup>6</sup> K R Ireland, 'Rite at the Center: Narrative Duplication in Susan Hill's "In the Springtime of the Year"', *ESQ* 13:3 (1983) pp. 172–180.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 172

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Woledge, 'Ambiguous sexuality, women writers and appropriative fictions: Susan Hill's *Strange Meeting*', *ESQ* <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0958923042000287858>> retrieved 27.10.19

<sup>9</sup> For a general discussion on the topic of male relationships at war, see: Sarah Cole, 'Modernism and the War: The Case of *Strange Meeting*', *ESQ* 68:2 (2001) pp. 469–500.

## Plot Summary

### Part One

*Strange Meeting* begins in a military hospital, where protagonist John Hilliard is being treated for wounds sustained during the ongoing World War One. The doctor, Crawford (a childhood friend of Hilliard's whom he dislikes) sends Hilliard to his family home in Hawton in order to continue his recovery. Hilliard's home is unhappy: he finds people blind to the true horrors of war and is unable to communicate. In particular, Hilliard is dismayed at the deterioration of his relationship with his sister, who has spent the war and leaves Hawton as soon as he is physically able to do so.

Hilliard rejoins his battalion in France only to discover that many men in his platoon have been replaced by new recruits. Hilliard has a new batman, a new adjutant, a new second lieutenant, and a new second in command with whom he is to share a room. Though Hilliard had initially been resentful of Barton, they quickly establish a great friendship. They go on walks, share personal information, and have other companions, depending on circumstances, for emotional support.

Meanwhile, Barton is stationed in the French countryside awaiting their return to the front. The summer is a holiday to the new recruits who have yet to see any action. Barton spent preparing for battle with a succession of drills and exercises, and the night-time walks, and, for Hilliard and Barton, gentle strolls through orchard-lined fields.

Hilliard and Barton's picturesque summer comes to an end at the conclusion of the Battle of Passchendaele. As they are to travel closer to the battle lines, Hilliard and Barton are taking a walk down a path when they stumble upon the wreckage of a German plane with the charred body of a pilot. Their summer is over.

### Part Two

The novel continues as Hilliard, Barton, and the rest of their company are travelling a few miles away from the front line. Once occupied by the Germans, Feuvry has been left in ruins. Barton writes a long letter home describing the condition of the place.

Not long after Barton and Hilliard begin settling into their new living area, they are faced with a problem; a young recruit named Harris is holed up in the corner of the cellar and in a foetal position with his hands covering his face, crying, deeply afraid of the sound of shells. Hilliard and Barton agreed that Barton's charm and good nature may be effective, and Barton and Hilliard eventually persuades the soldier to return upstairs, and tells him to wait inside the cellar. A shell falls momentarily and a shell falls on the house, killing Harris. As it was he who convinced Barton to return upstairs, Barton is consumed with guilt and blames himself for the soldier's death.

After a period of depression and growing fatalism, Barton is selected to travel with Hilliard to a post on the front line in order to draw a map and gather information about the area. They encounter numerous bodies and limbs, and are under heavy shelling. Barton witnesses the death of a German sniper, and has a brief but intense emotional experience. He returns to the front with a distant and cold attitude. He is aware that his experiences of war have changed him. The conversation between Barton and Hilliard that closes with Barton telling Hilliard that

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED





### Part Three

The final section of the book begins with a long, angry letter from Barton to his father, expressing his frustration with the notion of honour attached to war, and wishes to inform his family of the horrific conditions of battle. Hilliard is angry after he receives a letter from his sister announcing her marriage to Henry Partington.

Hilliard, Barton and several others are sent on a reconnaissance mission to the German lines to get out any information possible. They are close to the Germans' trench when a shell falls nearby, hitting the ground and his comrades suffer injuries. Barton wants to try to help Coulter, Hilliard and Barton to return to base. Barton writes another letter explaining the continued deterioration of his personality and his deep sense of guilt that he left Coulter in no man's land to die. He is then summoned to a group meeting. Colonel Garrett, the commanding officer, announces that he is resigning because of a disagreement with his superiors over their continued reliance on perilous reconnaissance raids.

On the night before they are to go into battle, Hilliard and Barton discuss plans to win the war. In the morning, they are sent to the front line. Hilliard and Barton quickly launch an attack, which is unsuccessful, and many men are killed. With piles of bodies stacked up, Hilliard is injured by a shell and hides in a hole laden with corpses and body parts. Eventually, he is rescued and is taken to a hospital in France. His injuries mean he must have his leg amputated. In the hospital, Hilliard receives numerous letters from Barton's family. Barton is missing and Hilliard informs them that it is highly unlikely that their son will be found alive. They return to England and setting out to visit Barton's family at their home.

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED



# Part One: Summary and Analysis

## Pages 2–28

**Locations:** Military hospital, family home at Hawton, London

**Characters:** John Hilliard, Crawford, Beth and Constance Hilliard, the Major



### Summary

- ❖ Introduced to protagonist John Hilliard and his family.
- ❖ Narrative is divided between Hilliard's time in a military hospital, his experiences at home, and his journey back to the war.
- ❖ Primarily focuses on Hilliard's civilian life at home.

The novel introduces the protagonist, John Hilliard, who is unable to sleep. We are introduced to his time in the military hospital, where he is being treated for a shrapnel injury to his leg. His doctor is a man called Crawford, a childhood acquaintance of Hilliard's who he irrationally dislikes. An account of his time at the hospital is interspersed with random memories from his childhood. Hilliard attempts to bribe Crawford as he is so desperate to sleep. Crawford refuses and sends him to his family home to rest.

During his first week of leave his mother Constance makes him go to see the Major, an elderly neighbour who has known Hilliard since childhood. The Major ignores most of what Hilliard says and is unaware of the demoralising nature of his life. He should have been a cavalryman.

Hilliard feels isolated at home and is unable to adapt to life outside of war. He takes part in dinner parties, the uninformed military opinions given by old men, and the fact that life is completely as normal. His sleep is interrupted by nightmares and the smell of roses from a garden in front of him of the war.

After a late-night stroll to the beach, Hilliard has a memory from his childhood with Beth as they are swimming in the sea. Back at the house, Hilliard visits his sister in London. He tells her about everything he is feeling, but finds that the closeness they once shared is gone. That she is engaged to be married to a local lawyer twenty years her senior named Kemble. Feeling otherwise, Hilliard tells her he is happy for them and returns to his room.

Hilliard is eager to leave Hawton and return to France. He is accompanied to the train by Crawford, who wears grand clothes and makes idle conversation as they walk. They meet Kemble, who tells Hilliard that his brother was killed in the war, but all Constance can do is to tell him that now Kemble is letting the station fall.

On travelling to London Hilliard observes civilians buying useful military equipment for their relatives at war and buys himself a gift, a new cane, which he instantly regrets. With a few hours to wait before his train, Hilliard reflects on his time at home and what will be waiting for him when he finally rejoins his platoon. He is happy that he has left his home and he is looking forward to getting back to France, with the prospect of returning to military life granting him 'a moment of singing happiness' (p. 28).

### Contextual Information

Walking sticks were commonly used and often brought back from the front. They were made out of the wood and metal.

For further info, see: 'First World War Walking Sticks' <http://www.firstworldwar.com/ww1-sticks/>

INSPECTION COPY

**COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED**



### Character Relationships (AO1)

Despite largely acting as a bystander to the events around him, the opening part of the novel is told from Hilliard's point of view. The reader sees everything through his eyes and for other characters from his thoughts; however, we learn little about Hilliard himself, only from an injury. The reader is subjected to the same emotional barrier as everybody else. The start of the novel establishes Hilliard's isolation and unhappiness at home. Susan Hill uses this to highlight Hilliard's plight, with each member contributing to it.

- Constance, his mother, is the detached civilian member of society, blissfully unaware of the war.
- Beth, his sister, is the symbol of Hilliard's childhood that he desperately wishes to return to.
- His father is unnamed and neither seen nor heard from, there is only mention of him. The relationship between father and son, on the subject of the war, is strained. The father is overly preoccupied with his work and seems emotionally distant from his son.

Through the interactions with his family we can begin to feel Hilliard's sense of isolation. As the war progresses, his sister Beth, has become as distant as everybody else.

### Language (AO2) | Theme (AO1): Anxiety

The theme of 'anxiety' is foregrounded with a use of repetition, and specifically the use of **epistrophe**: the ending of a series of lines, phrases, clauses or sentences with the same word or words.

*He was **afraid of going to sleep**. For three weeks, he had been **afraid of going to sleep**. ... he recalled also the trick he had used as a child, to keep himself **awake**.  
He wanted to stay **awake**. (p. 2)*

This informs the reader that the character is suffering from insomnia, which is usually the result of some underlying anxiety or trauma. Given the context of World War I, the reader might expect Hilliard to be suffering from shell shock, although it is never specifically stated. There is also a striking use of **simile** during Hilliard's reflection on his childhood dancing lessons at the local Methodist Hall, with the memory of the 'fat hot-water pipes [that] ran like intestines' (p. 3). The image of bodily interiors hints at the possibility that Hilliard has already witnessed some extreme human injuries in the war.

### Language (AO2)

The **motif** of memory is introduced in this section, and this supports the theme of 'Home'. Hilliard's principal memories are from childhood: the memory of a boy at dancing lessons; the experience on horseback; and the memory of swimming. Beth symbolises an ideal of his youth, but their present relationship is different from that of childhood.

The **motif** of memory is used by Hill to highlight the impact of the war on Hilliard: his separation from his home, and the changes he perceives in the central family relationships that occurred in his absence. This is linked to childhood, Hilliard remembers how he shared the secret of his sleeping in her bed before he returned to his own room at Hawton on the front. He feels that his sister has become like an extension of his mother and confide in her. He has nightmares and other feelings, and enters into denial by choosing to ignore them. He instinctively recognises his distress.

The motif of memory is also supported by a **semantic field** relating to the sense of smell, the human sense that spurs the memory in the most immediate way. In his nightmares, Hilliard experiences 'the sweet, rotten trench smell, of soil and chlorine and blood, and the mustard gas like garlic' (p. 9). The scent of roses from the garden in his bedroom becomes intolerable for him, suggesting that there may be some bad experience

associated with the smell of flowers from the war. The **semantic field** is developed by the 'faintly rancid' (p. 10) that lingers in the Major's home and on his housekeeper and in the latter case, Hilliard is forced to step away from the smell. Clearly there is something in common with that of the death and decay that Hilliard has experienced in France. In another instance, the 'briny smell' (p. 12) of the sea reminds Hilliard of his childhood summers, while 'the rain' continues to adversely affect him.

### **Theme (AO1): Home | Tone (AO2)**

The **tone** of the narrative complements Hilliard's feeling of estrangement and his sense of loss. Outwardly he remains impassive to the unsatisfactory conditions around him at the station, but his voice switches to internal monologue during Hilliard's remembered conversation with his mother. His presence and assumptions about the war irk him.

*What do you know about me? You know no 'hills' I dislike you, Crawford. (p. 10)  
But have you been there, Crawford? Have you been? (p. 5)*

The lack of understanding of the war experience that he encounters obviously gives rise to a sense of fatalism, of resignation in these thoughts.

*Well, does that matter? He has to be here, doesn't he, somebody has to be here.  
Field-Gunner, blinded. (p. 5)*

The voice of his mother is also presented in an unusual way, in untagged dialogue, after Hilliard visits the Major ('The Major always asks after you, John...' [p. 12]). This draws attention to Hilliard's alienation from his mother, as in this instance he imagines her as no more than a disembodied voice in his head. Oddly, the same sense of alienation is conveyed later in a very different way, in Hilliard's close attention to his mother's clothes as she walks with him to the station. He tells her that she looks as if she is going to a wedding, before reflecting that 'in truth she might always have been dressed for some wedding' (p. 21). His mother's need to present herself a certain way, to dress like a society hostess and send her son food parcels from Fortnum & Mason, seems entirely out of place in Hilliard's world. Constance also strikes her son as entirely disengaged from and insensitive to his experiences and those of the other young soldiers like him, as her scant attention to the death of the stationmaster Kemble's son at Mons demonstrates.

### **Language (AO2)**

The stylistic deviations in the narrative voice create a disjointed feel to the narrative, reflecting the erratic thought process and perspective of the protagonist. Hilliard's general lack of focus is shown through disjointed or fractured sentence structure, where sentences are often broken up by incomplete and lacking conjunctions. Another feature of the language is that sentences are often words tagged on as an afterthought, such as in the following example.

*He read them, read between the lines, read the Casualty Lists. Imagined. Knew. (p. 10)*

This fractured language reflects Hilliard's own difficulty in communicating with others and his uncertainty about himself and his future.

Hilliard is as spiritually absent as he is emotionally absent, and exists at a distance from his family. The only thought he has about his mother's knitting circle that visit on Wednesday is of her limping up the drive, an image that suggests a feeling of being emasculated. His sense of loss is brought home most directly in the opening section when Hilliard takes a walk on the beach. He cares nothing for any of his family and is 'simply waiting' (p. 10) for he knows no more than 'quiet misery' (p. 14) that he does not care whether he sees his childhood home (p. 10).

**COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED**



**Setting (AO2) | Language (AO2)**

In the beach scene, Hilliard is figuratively walking the line between his home and once he returns to France as a soldier. The action of the tide and the sand complements his family behind.

*The tide was right out, so that he had to wade through mounds of loose sand and satisfying under the soles of his feet. (p. 9)*

This is an example of a form of **personification** known as ‘**pathetic fallacy**’, whereby a character’s feelings are reflected in things that are not human, such as nature or inanimate objects. Hilliard’s restlessness is also reflected in the behaviour of the sea as it ‘moved about, turning over and back upon itself at the shore’ (p. 12).

pathetic personification are reflected in human nature

**Characterisation (AO1)**

Hilliard thinks about his lack of emotional engagement while in London waiting for the war to end. This provides one of the most memorable passages.

*It was as if being under water or some mild anaesthetic, everything around him remote, people parted and moved and reformed in bright, regular patterns like a kaleidoscope. (p. 27)*

This summarises Hilliard’s profound alienation from civilian life, as he watches the world from the Station. In particular, the references to underwater and anaesthesia, which invoke a sense of distance and lack of clarity, are used to represent Hilliard’s sense of his fragmented existence. The world is not immediate; they exist as if on a television screen, distant and remote. This contrasts with his life while at home, where the contrast between his expected feelings and the reality of war is stark.



**Debate Prompts**

1. The opening page of *Strange Meeting* is disrupted and disjointed; do you think this?
2. What do his interactions with his doctor, Crawford, reveal about Hilliard’s feelings about home?
3. How does Constance’s clothing mirror her personality and attitude?
4. What role does Hilliard’s neighbour, the Major, fulfil?



**Active Learning Task**

1. In groups, read through the passage where Hilliard is in London. How is his sense of alienation between Hilliard and ordinary civilians expressed? Pay particular attention to:
  - the tone of the narrative;
  - how Hilliard’s actions contrast with his perception of the public;
  - what identifies Hilliard as different. Is this real or is it an invention of the poet? Write a paragraph covering each of these points.
2. In groups, use the Internet to research prevalent attitudes to the war in 1914, stating whether your findings reflect the sense of naivety and complacency that existed in England regarding the war and its outcome.

**COPYRIGHT PROTECTED**



**Locations:** The French countryside, the town of Crevify, the military hospital ( )  
**Characters:** John Hilliard, David Barton, Colonel Garrett, Captain Franklin, Coulter



**Summary**

- ❖ Hilliard learns that most of his troop have been killed and replaced.
- ❖ Barton enters the narrative. He and Hilliard spend a lot of time together and their relationship grows close.
- ❖ Barton and Hilliard find the wreckage of a German plane, with a pilot inside.

Hilliard rejoins his battalion in a remote part of the French countryside, far away from the front. He is met there by Coulter, who informs him that most of his old platoon, including Batman, Bates, and many other soldiers, have been killed and replaced by new recruits. Hilliard has a brief meeting with his Commanding Officer, who is shocked to see that Hilliard appears to have aged considerably and has become demoralized. At the same time that Hilliard has been away, Garrett describes a particularly devastating battle in which his entire battalion were lost in just a day and a half.

Hilliard is irritated to learn that he is to share a room with a new lieutenant named Barton. Barton is to meet him. When they are finally introduced to one another, Hilliard finds that there is a certain 'something' about Barton which for some reason made him uneasy' (p. 40). In the evening Hilliard is joined by Barton, who tells Hilliard all about his family, his home life, and his thoughts on being at war. Though Hilliard is suspicious of the nature of the conversation, Hilliard eventually opens up to Barton about his own life and how he has managed to have done so, and the emotional connection between the two is established.

Later, as they are lying in their room, Hilliard discusses his shrapnel wound with Barton. Barton then recalls his time in the military hospital and a badly burned and confused fellow soldier. Hilliard had known that he should help the man but was unable to do so due to fear. Though Hilliard has no any details of this memory, Barton senses some anxiety and comforts Hilliard. Hilliard then tells Barton about his own life, and Barton, and sleeps soundly.

It is now September, and the platoon spends its days training for battle, while the soldiers write letters, playing cards and going for walks. Hilliard and Barton spend time drinking in a nearby town. On one occasion they invite Captain Franklin to join them, but he declines. In this comparatively relaxing summer Hilliard and Barton seem inseparable. Hilliard begins to write letters, often featuring in their letters, and plans are made for Hilliard to visit their families.

After a lot of waiting, the order comes through that in the morning they will be travelling to a new town to be closer to the front line. As Hilliard and Barton take a final stroll among the orchards, Hilliard notices something burning. He and Hilliard run towards the smell and find the wreckage of a German plane with the burned corpse of a German soldier still inside. This is the first time Hilliard has seen a dead body and he is visibly disturbed. For Hilliard, it is simply a precursor to all the bodies that will follow in the coming weeks.



INSPECTION COPY

**COPYRIGHT PROTECTED**



## Character Relationships (AO1)

This section primarily focuses on Hilliard rejoining his battalion in France, his intro blossoming friendship that follows.

As he arrives at the base camp, Hilliard feels tired but excited and imagines it 'like This is a particularly incongruous sentiment, given that Hilliard has just been told 'Company' (p. 30) have been killed during his absence. It is only after Garrett explains 'days, of absolute bloody chaos' (p. 37) that claimed the lives of so many of Hilliard to feel something about the loss of life and reflects again about the lack of understanding war. Back among his comrades, Hilliard has the chance to feel something, even if able to erect a barrier regarding his emotions.

## Theme (AO1): War

*Strange Meeting* is marked by its focus on the reality of war for its combatants. It dismisses old clichés of war early on, as seen in this exchange between Hilliard and Coulter:

*'They garble everything, it's all lies, you can't work out who's doing what, who's where – who won.'*

*Coulter looked at him sideways. 'Won, sir?'* (p. 30)

Even to the patriotic Coulter, the notion of winners in war is strange. His nonchalant **tone** as he tells Hilliard who has died prepares the reader for the destruction of war, involving a loss of life so routinely briefly and with minimal or no emotion. However, humanity survives with the aid. That is the case with Hilliard's flashback to the damaged and distressed Field-Gunner the military hospital due to his own fear. He now recognises that succumbing to his thing to do, and understands how his inaction contributed to the man's misery: 'The Gunner began to cry again very quietly, as though he had given up hope' (p. 51).

### Contextual WWI propaganda

The war was the enemy of the enemy towards the particular for Belgium, with degrees of

## Language (AO2)

The futility of the training exercises, and later the reconnaissance missions, is an 'War'. Hill emphasises the extent to which this futility is perceived by the soldiers **enumeration**, or the step-by-step listing of words and phrases for a cumulative effect.

*... a succession of drills and parades and inspections, lectures, exercises, demonstrations, physical training, bayonet and trench mortar practices. Many of them were resented simply because of their uselessness.* (p. 53)

enumeration  
enumeration  
words

## Contextual Information (AO3)

### World War I and failures of military tactics

There had never been a world war I and it was notorious for both the dreadful fighting life, largely due to the failures of military offensives on both sides. The nature of the engagement at the outset of the war, who assumed initially that winning the war was a matter of advantage firepower. In fact, the war became a stalemate, and battlefield tactics had to evolve through the use of stealthy infantry advances under cover of rapid and heavy artillery bombardments. Any degree of success relied on the arrival of the artillery in order to repeat the process and an arduous, frustrating and extremely costly in terms of human life. However, they were eventually army to concede gained territory.

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED



### Character relationships (AO1)

Hilliard and Barton form a character pairing, one based on being opposites, and the two as a platform to showcase their differences. Barton is an energetic and outgoing personality to be displayed without reservation. Hilliard, meanwhile, operates as a role of detached observer. However, there is more lying behind Hilliard's responses that confounds Hilliard's understanding of how to interact with another person, and how to act.

It is only later, as they are on an evening walk, that Hilliard comes to a conclusion in his belief that he can trust Barton, and is able to emotionally engage with another relationship seems to go beyond friendship as it is more akin to those who have become clear in Hilliard's frantic desire that Barton should be safe, away from

*For he should not be there among the roaring, blasting guns, in such appalling small daily accidents. He thought, 'I've saved him, we need what he has to give'*

Clearly this goes far beyond the standard army camaraderie, where death in the field is a fundamental part of army life, however painful that may be. Certainly, the experience is enough to leave Hilliard in something of a daze, so much so that he temporarily asks Barton something he has never asked another soldier before: his first name is important because it is evidence that the numbness he had been experiencing is



### Debate Prompts

1. How is death treated by Hilliard and Coulter? Is it respectful of those who die? Or is it disrespectful?
2. Discuss the following description: 'The tree trunks were like pewter'. (p. 100)
3. Given that this novel is supposed to carry an anti-war message, why does the author describe the experience of war – with its long, restful summer, full of card games, and French cafes on a warm night – as almost enjoyable?
4. Look at the description of the body found in the plane wreckage that Hilliard finds. How is it described? Is it a factual or emotional description? Think about the effect of this description in this way.



### Extended Essay Question

1. To what extent does Hill rely on the differences between Hilliard and Barton to explore the theme of love? In your answer, focus on how the author has shaped the



INSPECTION COPY

**COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED**





## Part Two: Summary and Analysis

### Pages 65–85

**Locations:** French countryside, Feuvry, support trench

**Characters:** John Hilliard, David Barton, Sergeant Locke, Harris



#### Summary

- ❖ The troop arrives in the town of Feuvry, a town destroyed by shells.
- ❖ A young soldier named Harris is killed after Barton had convinced him to go to the front where he had been nervously hiding.
- ❖ Barton struggles with feelings of guilt over the death of Harris.

Part Two begins as the troops are travelling to the town of Feuvry. It is a sunny day and Barton is glad to be marching, though it has meant that he sees Hilliard infrequently.

The next few pages are interspersed with extracts from a letter that Barton is writing to his family. His letter discusses his relationship with Hilliard, and events from the day's march. His letter is detailed and discusses the picturesque scenery along the route, the songs sung by the soldiers on horseback, repeatedly telling his family that he wishes they could see it all.

The soldiers' demeanour begins to change as they get closer to Feuvry. Surrounded by inhospitable conditions, their songs grow increasingly obscene and Barton is forced to listen. They hear a shell exploding and, though it is not near them, Barton begins to feel nervous. He has been warned that Feuvry was in a terrible state, Barton and his fellow soldiers are surprised to find it so. Barton writes a long letter home detailing the horrors of a ruined town.

Barton and Hilliard are in their room when Hilliard is called to deal with a young soldier who has holed himself up in the cellar and refuses to come out. Barton attempts to comfort Hilliard, patiently listening to his fears. Eventually, Harris agrees to leave the cellar and return to the front. Franklin does not need to be informed. Now out of the cellar, Hilliard goes upstairs to see Harris while Harris remains in the front room of the house. Barton is coming up to see Hilliard, killing Harris and eight other soldiers.

Barton feels responsible for Harris's death and is riddled with guilt. He talks at length with Hilliard, but they cannot blame himself or try to make sense of any deaths that happen at war. Hilliard and Barton briefly create a barrier between the two friends, as Barton believes Hilliard is too stubborn to unflinchingly send them to war. However, in the support trenches, Hilliard writes a letter to Barton expressing his concern that he has himself become battle-hardened, remarking upon the horror of Feuvry. He goes on to write about their dugout in the trench and some of the other soldiers. Hilliard admits that writing helps lift the depression that he has been suffering.

#### Analysis

##### Tone (AO2)

We notice a change of tone almost immediately in Book Two which switches to Barton's optimism. The overarching pessimism of Hilliard's outlook has been replaced with a more positive outlook. Barton's ability to enjoy a long march on foot which the adjutant imposed on him is a contrast to what he expects from Hilliard. Even on the very first page, we learn that 'the hard feeling of Hilliard' (p. 65), and that he enjoyed 'the sight of the men moving together' and 'the camaraderie of the front' (p. 65). Barton's disarming personality is demonstrated first-hand to the reader without the aid of any intermediary. After the sense of pessimism and foreboding that marked the tone of Book One, Barton's candour lifts the spirits of the reader in much the same way his arrival did for the

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED



**Theme (AO1): Home**

The theme of 'Home' is illuminated by the different tone of Barton's narrative. The memories of walking through France with his younger brother as well as childhood conversation with a soldier we have not seen. Barton is fully the opposite of Hilliard himself from his home, Barton embraces it: Hilliard's memories are full of inadequate happiness; Hilliard talks to other military personnel only when necessary, while Barton quite naturally.

**Language (AO2): Narrative Voice**

An element of digression is evident in the narrative voice, with several strikingly different textual forms being juxtaposed with the main narrative action. The first example is the quotation of seven lines of the soldiers' song 'Captain Sparrow', which is followed by a comment inserted by the narrator 'Captain Sparrow was riding a long way behind' (p. 66). The narrator's intention seems to be that the sense of goodwill and a buccannery spirit that the soldiers are trying to inspire by singing is a long way from what they are actually feeling and what their experiences are. This is followed in italics and quotes immediately after this is an official memorandum about the duration, pace (miles per hour) and rest requirements 'of an average march under normal conditions' (p. 66). This suggests ideological differences between those regulating the British army and those serving. An equivalent of 'Captain Sparrow / From Harrow / On the Hill' (p. 66) does not exist. Further examples of textual forms being juxtaposed with the main narrative action: the first report about the unsuitability of Feuvry 'for billeting purposes' (p. 78), including the alternative; the second immediately following it, a memorandum rejecting Garret's direction that 'Billets are to be found in FEUVRY' (p. 78). These are further examples of the interests of the high-ranking army figures and regulators and those of the ordinary soldiers.

Barton's letters home are also inserted in **juxtaposition** with the main narrative. In the first letter, the upbeat opening sentence ('You would like it here' [p. 67]) signals a conflict with the reality of his situation.

**Theme (AO1): Anxiety**

The psychological effects war can have on a soldier are given a set-piece example with Harris:

*Harris was huddled inside like a foetus, his hands up near his face. He was not breathing, only a continuous, agonised noise, a cry or a moan and yet neither of those. (p. 75)*

The character is clearly suffering from what came to be colloquially described as shell shock, but Hill opts to leave the soldier's condition unidentified in the text and presents the other soldiers as ill-trained to deal with the issue. Harris's case of shell shock is viewed as a deficiency of courage rather than a genuine illness. The diagnosis (sic) is that the stories of the summer's offensives have bred such fear and anxiety in Harris that the man has suffered a breakdown. This episode comments upon the rudimentary definition of masculinity that the army demands of its men, where traits such as courage, toughness and resilience are valued above everything else.

Hill uses this episode involving Harris and Barton to forge a direct connection between shell shock and neurosis. Barton possesses better skills at emotional engagement and is able to help Harris: as Hilliard points out a little later, 'You could do it for him... and I could not' (p. 78). Barton falls back on a stereotypically masculine solution to Harris's problem when he comforts Harris with brandy: 'Harris would be alcohol' (p. 78). Although brandy is specified, rum is also mentioned and is a **motif** of traditional masculinity, the drink being historically associated with British captured Jamaica in 1655. Barton's misplaced faith in the restorative power of alcohol to illustrate the limitations of the masculine world view dominant during World War I, being labelled a coward spurred recruitment and ultimately caused huge loss of life.

COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED

**Context**  
 Sir Thomas Browne, 17th century  
 Amongst the most influential and  
 understated of the English  
 sceptical and religious writers  
 forms the backbone of the  
*Epidemiology*  
 some would say that his  
 were better than any other

**Characterisation (AO1) | Character Relationships (AO1)**

Having begun the narrative as an optimistic innocent, Barton's experiences begin to affect his outlook and even his appearance. Hilliard notices 'that his [Barton's] eyes had taken on the common look of shock and misery and exhaustion, that the texture of his flesh was altered, was grained and worn' (p. 80). Barton is no longer moved by the sight of dead bodies and in his letter home admits to feeling 'ashamed of myself for getting so thoroughly hardened so quickly' (p. 82). However, Barton attempts to preserve his spirit with several emotional and intellectual props: the writings of Sir Thomas Browne, thoughts of his family, his correspondences and his friendship with Hilliard.

Barton's experiences also provide an opportunity for Hilliard to demonstrate his care at the beginning of the novel. This is apparent in his attempts to comfort the young soldier. However, Hilliard still experiences an air of discomfort at his new feelings of emotion and is unable to discuss these emotional barriers he has previously erected.

Hilliard wanted to put his hand out and touch him. And could not. (p. 81)

Much like Barton's battle to maintain his spirit, Hilliard's personal battle in the novel is to express his emotions.



**Debate Prompts**

1. Look at the passage that begins 'the countryside began to change' and 'and shell' (p. 69). How does the soldiers' changing attitude mirror the change in the landscape?
2. Read the description of the shell-shocked Harris in the basement. How does Susan Hill try to induce in the reader? Pay attention to the description of the room.
3. Barton's opinion that rum would be good for the soldier is pretty comic. What does this tell us about how soldiers were expected to act during this period?



**Active Learning Task**

1. Should Barton feel guilty that Harris died? Or should he have left him? Write a paragraph giving your opinion.



**Extended Essay Question**

1. Evaluate how Hill uses the themes of innocence and experience to explore the nature of war. In your answer focus on how the author has layered meanings.

**COPYRIGHT  
 PROTECTED**



**Locations:** Support trenches, various scenes on Barton’s mission to the observation post.  
**Characters:** John Hilliard, David Barton, Coulter, Colonel Garrett, Grosse, soldiers

INSPECTION COPY



**Summary**

- ❖ Barton is sent on an observation mission where he witnesses many deaths, including a young soldier who is shot right in front of him.
- ❖ Barton retreats into himself and briefly distances himself from Hilliard.
- ❖ Hilliard and Barton resolve their issues, and Barton tells Hilliard he loves him.

After two weeks in the support trenches, Barton is bored. However, there is a good reason for this. Hilliard and Barton are happy in one another's company. The lack of activity continues to give Barton a bad 'feeling' and we learn of the soldiers' superstitions: Armstrong, a soldier who was killed during the battle, being lucky in battle. Hilliard has a 'feeling' something bad would happen on the day he died. He is protected by his own forces survived. Hilliard was once sceptical of such claims, but now he believes.

Hilliard has lost his reserve and his fear of intimacy, and often feels overcome with love for Barton (p. 89) for Barton. Barton’s family now write letters specifically for Hilliard, and he delights in them. He is aware how special Barton is to him and prays that he will remain safe. However, Barton is sent to an observation post, where he is to draw a map of the area. Hilliard is terrified that Barton will die on his mission and considers demanding that Franklin send him in Barton’s place. While Hilliard has the realisation that he loves Barton ‘as he had loved no other person in his life’ (p. 94), he knows that Barton will die on his mission.

Barton is to be assisted by a runner named Grosse who will guide the way. As Barton is sent to the front line for battle, to continue an offensive that has already claimed a lot of lives. Hilliard is aware of the plan and the generals, surprising Hilliard with his openness. Barton and Grosse go to an observation point. A shell lands close by, making a huge explosion, and they soon realise they have been killed or injured. They carry on a little further and witness a young soldier being killed. Barton tries to help the dying soldier by ordering for a stretcher, though the request is not fulfilled. He is there for a few moments, disgusted that he is helping to facilitate these atrocities. He is aware of the boy he has just seen be killed and is aware that this event will change him.

The troops have camped five miles away from the trenches. At night, an emotional conversation takes place between Hilliard and Barton. Hilliard reassures Barton that he is still a compassionate soldier. Barton tells Hilliard that he loves him.

**Analysis**

**Theme (AO1): Love**

It is in this section that the relationship between Hilliard and Barton progresses from friendship into a loving one. Indeed, as concluded in the final words of Part Two is confirmation of this during an emotional late night conversation between the two:

*Barton let his arm drop, and moved a pace away. He said, ‘I love you, John.’ Hilliard looked at him. ‘Yes.’ He was amazed at himself. That it was so easy to say ‘Yes.’ (p. 117)*

This conversation takes place after Barton’s disastrous mission to the observation post. Hilliard now shared both good and bad times. We had witnessed signs of love earlier in the support trenches, when Hilliard feels ‘A warm pleasure, a sensation of being comfortable, comparative peace, doing dull, easy jobs in Barton’s company’ (p. 85).

COPYRIGHT PROTECTED



This is a blossoming love, idyllic and happy, and adds credibility to the claim that *Strange Meeting* is considered a romance novel. Indeed, we witness Hilliard acting as though he is in safety, as shown by the following quotations:

*But Hilliard had never known this kind of fear, not even on his own behalf. This agony of feeling on behalf of someone else was entirely new to him, he*

*In the night he woke and heard the guns and his heart thudded, he sat up and said, 'Don't let him be killed, don't let him be killed.' And did not even mind, at that moment when he was woken and heard him. 'Don't let him be killed.'* (p. 90)

When Barton is sent to the observation post and into harm's way, Hilliard's acute selfless love recognisable from any conventional love story. However, Hilliard also seems to 'come alive for Glazier' (p. 110), another of the soldiers, and takes on a mission that seems unable to do for the moment with Hilliard.

### Theme (AO1): War

Having witnessed 'the shot... a heap of limbs and helmets' (p. 101) in the trench, Hilliard's experiences are shocking him. Barton's agitation causes him to tear up the paper but this emotional display only proves that he is not lacking in feeling. The realisation of the young soldier he witnessed at close range, which confirmed the futility and senselessness of war, has even risked his own life, raising himself above the trench parapet and potentially in a reaction of sheer dismay to the death.

*For it seemed not to matter, nobody's life mattered, he was of no more or less importance than the Private who had just spouted blood at his feet.* (p. 104)

The reader can sympathise with Barton's action on an emotional level. However, within the context of the war and Barton's seniority on the mission, it is grossly irresponsible, as Grosse's 'furious, and unapologetic' (p. 104) intervention demonstrates.

### Character Relationships (AO1)

Immediately after the mission, Barton withdraws into himself, shutting Hilliard out. Barton's reaction mirrors Hilliard's behaviour at the beginning of the novel: he is silent with his brief replies to questions. Hilliard is fully aware of the parallels in their behaviour: 'his behaviour had become like his own in the past' (p. 106). Yet just as Hilliard had become like Barton, Hilliard must reverse the dynamics of their relationship and assume Barton's role. Hilliard becomes the patient listener and provides emotional support, and is able to draw Barton out of his shell. Hilliard even quotes an idea that he has memorised to support his position ("It is a brave act of valour to condemn death, but where life is worth valour to live" [p. 116]), demonstrating that he has grown intellectually from Barton's example.



### Debate Prompts

1. Regarding Barton's observation of the mission, his first trip into the field, what does this experience affect his outlook?
2. After he witnesses the young soldier's death, Barton places his head on the ground for several seconds. Why does he do this? Does Barton want to...



### Active Learning Task

1. In groups, do a close reading of Barton's speech on pages 114–115 ('It has been... What has happened to me?'), and evaluate his claim that he is not a coward using the following points of analysis:
  - Tone
  - The contrast between the description of the shot private and other soldiers
  - Barton's sense of futility

Write a page devoting a paragraph to each of these three points of analysis.

**COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED**



## Part Three: Summary and Analysis

### Pages 118–141

**Characters:** John Hilliard, David Barton, Coulter, various men on reconnaissance  
**Location:** Front line trenches, no man's land



#### Summary

- ❖ Barton writes a bitter letter to his family, detailing the brutal conditions of war.
- ❖ Barton, Hilliard and others go on a mission to enemy lines and possibly due to an error by Barton.
- ❖ Colonel Garrett speaks out against his superiors and is removed from his post.

The final part begins with a long and bitter letter from Barton to his family. The letter details the hardships of war, including the lack of food and shelter, as well as the deaths of soldiers. Barton expresses sympathy for the enemy soldiers who are living in the trenches. He also mentions that he would rather the truth of war is understood about honour and glory' (p. 121). He is concerned that his family will notice changes at home, although he tells them that he is kept in high spirits by an energetic and happy

The second part of the letter is headed under the title of 'LATER'. Barton describes a trench flooded and all the men were trapped in the dugout under heavy shelling for several days. He mentions that several men were killed, along with another soldier named Glazier. Barton ends the letter with a postcard reproductions of famous paintings.

Hilliard receives a letter from his sister, Beth, in which she informs him that she is pregnant. Hilliard as he thinks her life will now become indistinguishable from their mother's. A directive from Captain Franklin: Hilliard, Barton, Coulter, Ferris, Moreton, and Blaylock are sent on a reconnaissance mission to enemy lines with the intention of finding out any information about the enemy's positions. The mission is dangerous and the men are crawling in wet and muddy conditions when Barton loses focus and gets too close to the enemy lines. The Germans are alerted and fire a shell which kills Ferris, Moreton, and Coulter. Now Hilliard and Barton are left. Hilliard is waiting in their dugout and reprimands Barton for getting too close.

Barton writes another lengthy letter to his family. He relates an incident where he was ordered to retrieve a hedgehog that had been cruelly tossed over the top. He feels guilty about the incident and the conditions in no man's land. His letter ends as Hilliard arrives to tell him they have to go to see the Commanding Officer. Hilliard tells him that the Commanding Officer has ordered more reconnaissance missions to the enemy positions. Hilliard tells him that Colonel Garrett has told them that he believes the missions to be pointless and a waste of time. Hilliard tells him that he has been relieved of his post. Hilliard tells them that he will be replaced by a new Commanding Officer, and asks them to continue with their duties. Two days later,

#### Analysis

**Theme (AO1) | Language (AO2) | Setting (AO3)**

Barton's long letter to his family is the most explicit vehicle for the novel's anti-war message. Barton denounces himself and his fellow soldiers as 'drones not fighting men' (p. 121), arguing that the arduous efforts of the men having brought no military advancement or success. Hilliard is unable to understand and that is difficult for Barton to comprehend.

The constant digging and refortifying of trenches is symbolic of the futility of the war. Hilliard says 'the enemy's shells just keep breaking it all down' (p. 121). The vivid descriptions of the conditions present the setting described by Barton ('No more than 150 yards away is a metaphorical hell).

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED



... it doesn't look like a land made by either God or man, it was thrown up by devils with no sense of anything but chaos. (p. 120)

In this simulation of hell, the toiling soldiers are implicitly compared to devils or demons digging down into the fiery pits and to eternal damnation. However, there is also a focus on the extraordinary individual bravery of soldiers, such as Glazier's altruistic refusal of a stretcher, despite being 'horribly mangled' (p. 123). Barton also makes clear in his letter home after the mission how 'amazed I am by the astonishing bravery of many men and by their tolerance of pain and terrible conditions' (p. 137).

#### Contextual Info

The attention drawn to the hedgehog and Barton's overlooked aspects, for example, horses, supplies; cats were in the trenches; and cats in enclosed spaces are highly useful to

#### Characterisation (AO1) | Tone (AO2)

The tone of the letter differs significantly from what we witness in Barton's other letters. His previous letters had been littered with jokes and familiar language, and had been written in a light and cheerful tone. This letter has a more serious and sombre tone. It is only at the end of the letter that he addresses his family, which perhaps indicates that the therapeutic dividends of writing are more significant than the actual content. The letter is full of examples of Barton's increasing dissatisfaction with Barton's personalisation of the fatalistic battlefield refrain, 'We're here because of the British soldiers in World War I to the tune of 'Auld Lang Syne'.<sup>10</sup>

Having never completely believed in the rectitude of the war, Barton feels no guilt in a letter home.

*A mess. That's all. I shouldn't say that but we censor our own letters. Tell all the boys not to be talking about honour and glory. (p. 121)*

Instead of comforting his family, Barton invokes the spirit of Wilfred Owen and refers to the battle, and instead tells of the incredible hardships that the soldiers live through. He mentions the enemy soldiers, of whom he says, 'poor devils, they are in just the same mess as we are with all their problems' (p. 121). This consideration for the suffering of the enemy invokes the mood of the novel gets its name, 'Strange Meeting' by Wilfred Owen.

The war has left Barton feeling demoralised and apathetic. When he and Hilliard go on a reconnaissance mission his tone becomes sarcastic as he recites the official line for

*Time spent in reconnaissance is seldom wasted. Field Service Regulations Part 10*

Of course, Barton has not become an obedient army robot: he does not believe that disobedience is futile. He has accepted the cruel uncertainty of war, for the time being. His sarcasm, however, is evident during the reconnaissance mission, in Barton's reaction to the reconnaissance team are also at large in 'wriggling sideways in the mud' (p. 131) in the scenario where the one side might bump into the other. Barton imagines writing the observation that the German line could be deduced from the sound of a faint whisper... [and] from the faintest sound of the cough and whisper' (p. 131). Although the blackest sort, Barton's cynical state of mind is possibly responsible for the mood of the very least for his naivety and inexperience that is to blame for the group's poor position, and for the deaths of Ferris, Moreton and Coulter being killed by a shell as a result.

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED



<sup>10</sup> For more background on the song, see: Rowan Morris, 'Researching the Trenches: Notes on "We're Here Because of the British Soldiers in World War I to the Tune of 'Auld Lang Syne''', <https://rowaneliotmorris.wordpress.com/2015/03/07/researching-the-trenches-notes-on-we-are-here-because-of-the-british-soldiers-in-world-war-i-to-the-tune-of-auld-lang-syne/>, 4.11.19



### **Debate Prompts**

1. Look at Barton's letter home that begins this section. Do you agree with him that drones not fighting men'?
2. Given his comparative indifference when his sister told him at their home, why is he so angry when he receives the news of his sister's marriage?
3. Why does Hill have Colonel Garrett removed at this stage in the narrative?



### **Extended Essay Questions**

1. What effect does Hill's extensive use of letters in the narrative have on the novel? Analyse the way in which Hill uses letters and other narrative elements to shape meanings.



INSPECTION COPY



INSPECTION COPY

INSPECTION COPY

**COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED**





## Pages 141–165

**Characters:** John Hilliard, David Barton, Parkin, Captain Franklin, Constance Hilliard, George Bennett

**Location:** Trench, no man's land, military hospital, Barton's home town



### Summary

- ❖ The men go over the top and into battle.
- ❖ Hilliard is injured and must have his leg amputated, while Barton is killed in battle and is presumed dead.
- ❖ Hilliard returns to England to recover before visiting Barton's home town at the end of the novel.

It is the night before the men go into battle, and Barton is afraid. After talking to a young recruit, Parkin, he feels that he should comfort him in some way. Back in the trench, Barton makes plans for meeting up once they are back in England. They fall asleep and realise that things don't happen like this often in a lifetime' (p. 146).

In the morning, both men are more optimistic that the plan might work, having witnessed a successful attack. Hilliard and Barton eventually go over the top but are soon separated. Hilliard's optimism was unfounded and the plan has been a total disaster. Amid the chaos, the two men are thrown together and they attempt to reach safe ground. They find a shell hole and plan to wait out. Hilliard's leg is bleeding and he realises he has been shot. Parkin leaves the hole and Hilliard passes out.

Hilliard regains consciousness to the sound of more shelling and finds that it is dark and has a dream that he and Barton are swimming in the bay at Hawton, full of landmines. As he drifts in and out of consciousness, Hilliard eventually decides that he will have to wait in the trench. He is crawling among bodies when he comes across Parkin, who has been killed in the foxhole he had left. Hilliard reaches the trenches after many hours of crawling, and finds a platoon that is not his own. Waking up in a military hospital to the sound of Captain Franklin, he learns that his wounded leg has been amputated. He receives two letters from Barton. One is missing and presumed dead, but asking Hilliard for any news he may have of Barton. The other is candidly that there is very little hope of Barton turning up alive, and requests that Hilliard visit him in hospital.

Hilliard travels back to England to continue his recovery in a special hospital. He is looked after by a doctor who fusses over him and asks if there is anything that he needs. He is also visited by Constance Hilliard in a brief conversation. Hilliard receives another letter which details the arrangements for his return to his household. As he is travelling he begins to recognise many names and scenery. He is met at the railway station by a neighbour of the Barton's, George Bennett, and the two travel by car. Hilliard recognises all the street names, because of the long conversations with Barton. The novel ends.



**COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED**



**Theme (AO1): War | Characterisation (AO1) | Attitudes and Values**

The brutality of war has been slowly introduced into the narrative throughout the novel, showing the chaos and disorder of battle. These glimpses of war have built tension for both the characters and the readers. Shown from Hilliard's point of view, war is a chaotic and terrifying experience where the participants do not wake. Dead bodies and limbs are everywhere and Hilliard spends much of his time hiding from battle among piles of corpses.

The fact that the Big Push is shown from Hilliard's viewpoint supports **the implied author's** condemnation of the war. Whereas Barton believes that 'There will never be another war', Hilliard has no faith in humanity collectively, only individually, and so believes 'There will always be wars' (p. 142). This debate cuts to the quick regarding the propaganda that accompanied World War I, which was often merged from a quote attributed to US president Woodrow Wilson that it would be 'the war to end all wars'. The war, of course, prove to be tragically inaccurate. Despite the opposition between Barton and Hilliard that has defined the novel since their first meeting is reinforced in the last part of the novel. The sensitive, enlightened Barton behaves erratically during the approach to Queronne, comparing the 'lemon-white' vista to 'a Turner canvas' (p. 147). This both worries and alienates Hilliard, and indicates that he is better equipped emotionally to survive the hard realities of the battle to come.

In condemning the British military strategists, Hill depicts the horrors of trench warfare that resulted in the war being long-drawn-out and hugely costly in terms of life and resources. There is also a sense that the military top brass cared inadequately for their men in the trenches. Barton that the German trenches are, by contrast to those of the British, furnished with comforts (p. 144). However, it is the strategic shortcomings of the mission commanders and the 'Surprise Element' (p. 147) of their manoeuvre that is most glaring. As the brutal German Army ambush becomes clear to him, Hilliard's thoughts are simple and damning.

*He had a clear picture of the whole English army caught in the neatest, simplest trap.*

Parkin, who believes he has an escape route for them both, is more direct still in observing the situation.

**Language (AO2) | Tone (AO2)**

Hill's narrative style in describing the battle is unemotional and lacks the level of detail found in the novel; elaborate descriptions are, after all, unnecessary when the facts are so stark. Hilliard's detachment is such that when he suffers a serious leg wound and he does not feel this sensation of lightness, of floating, so that 'his eyes could not focus and he heard the sound of distance down a tunnel' (p. 150), the reader cannot be sure that he is about to lose consciousness or what happens.

Hilliard's characterisation stands in stark contrast to the earlier reconnaissance mission where he is overly distracted by the injuries of others and he had to be ordered to return to the front. The reader witnessing the surge through Hilliard's eyes is that it allows Barton's innocence to be preserved in the reader's mind.

the  
of  
vic

**Context**  
The US  
was the  
involve  
he was  
conceiv  
of the  
intend

INSPECTION COPY

**COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED**



### Themes (A01): Home/Love | Language (A02)

Despite Barton's death, and 'the continued [phantom] pain' (p. 157) of Hilliard's message is tentatively positive. This is because of Hilliard's transformation over the course of the narrative from a misanthropic loner, his relationship with Barton has not only survived despite the misery of war, but given him the will to live. Finding himself 'among a shell hole... the revulsion of it made him determine to get up and out somehow' (p. 157). The story ultimately transforms Hilliard's character. However, it takes time for Hilliard to get back to his boat home to Dover he is still very despondent, thinking that 'He wanted to return to his home' (p. 160), and dreading the attention of the other passengers. Back in England his mansion 'given over for the duration of the war' (p. 162) to the army's medical storehouse. Hilliard books that Barton was reading in France; otherwise, he is indifferent to her airs and graces. In conclusion, however, his general outlook changes. He travels to visit Barton's family in the countryside from the train is 'exactly as David had described it' (p. 164). Hilliard finds it difficult to identify the roads and signs on the way home, as he has taken in everything that Barton had allowed himself to be fully immersed in Barton's home life.

We see Hilliard's new perspective on home in the dream he has while lying on the battlefield near his home. Instead of being a child he is an adult, and Barton is now swimming. Barton has helped Hilliard create a new idea of home, one that does not rely on his past to sustain it. The novel ends with an example of **pathetic fallacy**: as George Bennett describes the narrator observes that 'The sky was vast, darkening behind them' (p. 165). The weather of the recent past that Hilliard can now leave behind him.



#### Debate Prompts

1. How would you describe Barton's attitude on the morning they are to go home? How might he be feeling this way?
2. When Hilliard passes out on the battlefield he has a dream about his home. How do his previous memories of home, and what does change in him might this suggest about his future?
3. What is the effect of introducing characters with significant roles such as Barton and Bennett into the narrative?
4. The final line is optimistic about Hilliard's future; how has the reader been prepared for this by the end of the novel? How does the final couple of pages end?



#### Extended Essay Question

1. Analyse Hill's presentation of ideas of home, showing how the difference between Hilliard's and Barton's respective homes influences your understanding of the novel. Focus on how Hilliard's perspective on home changes over the course of the novel.

COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED



# Whole-text Analysis

## Characterisation (AO1)

### John Hilliard

There are two Hilliards in *Strange Meeting*: the one before and the one after David Barton's sentence that sums up the 'earlier' John Hilliard, it is at the moment he meets his companion, and thinks that 'it was all very well to feel something, to think it, but it reads like Hilliard's note to himself to keep himself isolated from others, that will come to characterise his friendship with Barton.

We meet Hilliard at a time when his emotional detachment is at its peak. Injured by war and a degree of indifference to killing ('He found that he was rather good at shooting the horrific reality of war. Nonetheless, Hilliard is something of a contradiction as he has to leave the comfort of his home to return to battle. He does not approve of war to continue, but neither has he ever seen so much as a soldier that he feels that he should else. The alienation from his home means that Hilliard cannot reconcile his pre-war self that remains with returning to the battlefield. In addition, Hilliard's experience at war does not identify with his pre-war self, 'the pieces of a past belonging to some stranger' (pp. 24-25). Towards the doctor Crawford, a childhood acquaintance, is one manifestation of this identity crisis, meanwhile, is transmitted to the reader through his voice and thought. The characteristics the reader might expect in the voice of a person aged 22. Occasional repetition in the narrative voice – **anaphora**, **adnomination** and **homoioteleuton**, is also intended to give the impression of someone tired and dull.

*... he felt himself changing daily, felt himself to be old, twenty, thirty, fifty years gone out in April. Hardened, too. (p. 8)*

The gap that has emerged between his childhood and adult identity is significant. He left his home as a mere boy and has returned as a man to a home that has failed to make any kind of transition with him. This sense of stasis is symbolised in the tableau Hilliard imagines of the young woman with the child 'transfixed by the sight of Constance Hilliard' (p. 25) as his train leaves the station for London. In addition, Hilliard's interests and affections tend towards the morbid. He rejects his father's interest in gardening, but fondly remembers a childhood collection of owl pellets containing mice bones.

**anaphora** – repetition of several sentences  
**adnomination** – different for word in close proximity  
**homoioteleuton** – adjacent or

When he meets David Barton, Hilliard changes in two respects: he becomes envious of Barton's family and receptive to Barton's openness. Their relationship relies to an extent on Hilliard's willingness to relinquish his own personality in favour of the personalities of those he is interacting with. In the novel, Hilliard seldom dictates his relationships. With Beth he accepts that the relationship is the worse without trying to remedy it and he generally follows his mother's stiff instructions. This is noticeable when he visits his neighbour, the Major. Despite his disgust at the dog, Hilliard does not assert the need to open the window.

*'Would you mind if I opened the window?'*

*'I get rheumatism. It's the damp. The dog gets it too.'*

*'The window stayed shut.'* (p. 11)

In addition, Hilliard does not say what he is thinking despite the Major belittling him. He should have been a cavalryman.

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED



By the end of the novel, however, Hilliard seems better equipped to deal with the world. He seems less morose and introspective. For example, while recuperating in hospital, he thinks of Christmas with his family, he is still able to compliment his mother on her appreciative looks of the male patients as she is leaving. This new degree of emotional maturity is exclusively because of his relationship with Barton, the human catalyst who allows him to move forward more. However, the contrast between his emotional development and his environment is stark for Hilliard. As Reed observes, 'Hilliard's ironic revelation is that he would rather fight than live in his sterile home where truths and emotions are camouflaged in silence'.<sup>11</sup>

### David Barton

Before Barton has been seen or heard by either Hilliard or the reader, we are given a glimpse of him as an arrived soldier by Colonel Garrett: 'Pleasant young chap, really' (p. 39). Garrett's description is appropriate for Barton, as it anticipates Barton's lack of complication and fluid manner. Barton's conversation about his aunt in the officers' dining room is peppered with 'some kind of central theme' that galvanises an increasingly diverse group.

*He talked as if he were quickly, smiled, laughed at himself and, on all sides, at*

Barton has a strong sense of himself and his background. Out walking with Hilliard, he talks freely and warmly about his family, including his imprisoned '**conchy**' brother, Edward, whose courage of his convictions Barton admires. Yet just as Hilliard begins to find himself throughout the novel, Barton struggles to retain his identity as it is repeatedly challenged by war and the senseless death and destruction he witnesses. It is at these times that Barton mirrors Hilliard's distant and cold attitude at the beginning of the novel, his face even taking on a 'withdrawn' expression. The reader might readily associate with Hilliard: the transformation (as with Garrett) illustrates just how debilitating war and isolation can be. Barton recovers by displaying the traits that have defined his character: good communication skills and a strong family will pull him through when he returns to England.

conchy  
object  
refuse  
oblig

Barton's optimism, however, ultimately proves misplaced, and his death is foreshadowed by a **pathetic fallacy** just moments before he is to go over the top, when he describes the sky over the battlefield. The sun won't last but it won't rain either, and just now it's very beautiful. His last words we hear from Barton, his last appreciation of life, and the mention of a better place suggests that his soul is destined for a better place.

### Family Members

#### Constance Hilliard

Constance Hilliard is a mother unaware of the true horrors of war that her son has experienced. She treats John in much the same manner, keeping his childhood carefully stored, and inquiring whether he would like 'muscatels and almonds' from Fortnum & Mason food parcels, since he has loved these as a boy. She clearly has more sympathy for her son while his father seems more interested, but she is also prone to insecurity. An example of her tendency occurs early in the novel, after Constance meets the stationmaster.

*Kemble's son is going to this station go... it always used to be so neat and tidy, well kept, but he seems not to care as he did. His son was killed at Mons. Do you remember him? He's too old, it has got too much for him. (p. 23)*

The coldness of her remarks is not lost on her son.

*She has told me that Kemble's son was killed, at Mons, and has gone on to the front. Do you not know? Does she not think of it? (p. 24)*

<sup>11</sup> Mary Jane Reed, 'Recommended: Susan Hill', *The English Journal*, 72.4 (1983), pp. 75–76.

Hilliard has always been uneasy about his mother's airs and graces and 'the grand' when she visited him at school. However, Hilliard's experiences have alienated him from Constance, as they hold incompatible views of war. Hilliard feels on the verge of desertion, but his mother had done, and his mother blithely assumes that he'll be safely home from war, unaffected by the death of a boy she has known personally. Nonetheless, as noted in his duties by visiting her injured son in the hospital near the end of the novel.

### Beth Hilliard

Hilliard only misses his sister Beth in France, not his parents, due to his childhood. The novel depicts them as an inseparable team as youngsters; they had both been suffering from war, had leisure, had swam with one another for courage, and had risked parental disapproval. Hilliard could feel safe. Hilliard had looked up to his older sister, who seems to have been a role model. He senses that Beth seems to have grown distant from him, sounding 'like a hostess' (p. 18) when he is about to return to France. Although she has never left home, it is possible that her mother has turned Beth into a copy of herself, helping organise social events for the soldiers on leave. She has also adopted her mother's poor grasp of the dangers of war, observing that 'you're not due for another' (p. 18).

However, the reader must be wary about uncritically accepting Hilliard's judgement. Hilliard, with emotional engagement is bound to leave that judgement impaired. As an example, he witnessed Hilliard's irrational dislike of Crawford. There are several instances where Hilliard's feelings towards her brother. When Beth tells Hilliard of her decision to marry Hilliard, he reacts so insensitively as, 'For a moment she looked concerned, wanting his approval' (p. 18). Beth is worried that she has offended John by not telling him sooner. Although Hilliard is expected to marry and follow their mother's role, his attitude towards her seems rather unkind, born of lack of options or even desperation ('Beth was not beautiful, she was almost ugly, but her father and mother to contend with daily' [p. 19]). Most tellingly, Beth's reaction to Hilliard's decision to marry will be happy in marriage seems both joyful and relieved.

*'Oh, John! Yes, you're right. I will, I know I will. But I did want you to see it, I did.'*

Clearly, John's approval means a great deal to Beth, and Hill emphasizes this in Beth's use of rhetorical devices of **exclamation**, **anaphora** and **epistrophe**. Beth's concern for Hilliard is immediately afterwards, when she questions her brother about his walk on the beach. Hilliard suggests that he doesn't want to return to France. She may feel that he is homesick, but his rejection of his home and family seem rather colder. Beth's concerns may be understandable, but they are genuine, and her tone may reflect an understanding of her own ignorance. In the narrative there seems little reason, in truth, for Hilliard to imagine his mother better than Beth' (p. 22).

### Minor Characters

#### Harris

A young soldier who hides in the basement after suffering from a shell injury, but is coaxed out by Barton, but is killed by a shell shortly afterwards.

#### Crawford

A general practitioner who treats Hilliard for his shrapnel injury. He has a long acquaintance of Hilliard's and Hilliard irrationally dislikes him.

#### Colonel Galloway

A commanding officer and a lawyer by profession who is a pacifist. He uses his profession as a coping mechanism for war, but who cares about the war. He is removed from his position toward the end of the novel after he criticizes the officers over the use of reconnaissance missions, which Galloway believes are unnecessary.

#### Captain Franklin

An emotionally aloof adjutant. He makes Barton walk to France with Hilliard and Barton on a reconnaissance mission. Hilliard believes that Franklin is against them both.

**COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED**



**Coulter** The 'new' batman after Hilliard's last had been killed. He appears several times in the novel, often voicing strongly patriotic sentiments. He has a large presence in the narrative until his death, when he goes on a reconnaissance mission. Barton feels guilty about his death and wants more to help.

**The Major** A retired military man who is a neighbour of the Hilliard family.

**Barton's Family /Mother** Although they don't appear directly in the novel, their voices can be heard through the letters they write to Barton. The family is making a special effort to include Hilliard in their letters. They write to each other regularly after Barton is presumed dead, and Barton is on his way to visit the family at their house.

**Henry Partington** Beth's fiancé, who is only featured in the novel via Beth's words.



### Discussion Prompts

1. Do you think Barton's character makes him suitable for war? If not, why not? Why did he join up in the first place, and what does this possibly reveal about him in the context of World War I?
2. Barton's fate is left uncertain at the end of the novel. What does this tell you about the poet's understanding of the novel?
3. Do you think that Hilliard projects his negative experiences of war onto Barton?



### Active Learning Task

1. Barton is sensitive, poetic, increasingly disillusioned by war; to what extent do you see allusions to Wilfred Owen in Barton's character? Research facts about Owen and compile a list of similarities or differences.

**COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED**



INSPECTION COPY



## Relationships (AO1)

### Hilliard and Barton

The 'strange' part of Hilliard and Barton's meeting is that it produces something for both characters, and especially for Hilliard as he survives the war. Another strange aspect of their relationship is that Hilliard and Barton are dramatically different. They have been raised under different standards of socialisation and to expect different levels of emotional engagement. Hilliard is a reserved, subdued, experienced man of war, Barton is thoughtful and sensitive, but their dynamic is defined by Barton's initial value to Hilliard is his innocence, which Hilliard feels to be precious.

Although this relationship is one of profound love based on a bond forged through World War I, it might be questioned whether the relationship between Hilliard and Barton is purely platonic in nature. Though Susan Hill claimed in the afterword for the novel that this portrayal of their relationship does occasionally imply that their relationship may be more than just friendship. In the thoughts that follow their first intimate conversation, after they walk to the orchard, Hilliard uses sensual language, which Hilliard's narrative is included to set the tone for their relationship.

*... this woman who was different and strange to him, it had come because she could not be with. (p. 48)*

*Barton rolled over lazily... But for some time neither of them made a move.*

*Barton was looking with interest at the red, rough-edged scar along his left arm, which he had seen at it until now had been the doctors, and that was not the same thing. (p. 48)*

There are many other images suggesting an intimate relationship between the two characters. It can certainly be argued that their relationship goes beyond regular conventions, but in a way because it ultimately does not change anything about the novel. It is the contrast between their bred lifelong allegiances and memories, that is of primary importance in defining their relationship.

### Hilliard and Beth

This torment felt through the lack of reconciliation between Hilliard's personal and professional life is particularly acutely through his relationship with his sister, Beth. Having enjoyed a close relationship with his sister during childhood, Hilliard looks to Beth to function as a stabiliser who can help him cope with war life. Unfortunately for Hilliard – and Beth, it must be added, for she is unaware of his feelings – she has, to his dismay, become an adult in the mould of their mother and is equal to her in her social life, hosting social event after social event. Yet his disappointment with Beth is not just about her social life, but that it contrasts so starkly with what Hilliard believes to be the truth about her. The idle or pleasant moments when there is a war raging.

### Hilliard and Garrett

Garrett's tactful and convivial relationship with Hilliard serves to remind the reader of the reassuring presence for the unit under his immediate command. Garrett's communication with Hilliard often comes down into the trenches. This explains Hilliard's shock at returning to the front and finding about him [Garrett] had changed' (p. 34). Hilliard's perception of Garrett is that he is a man whose well-being of the company as a whole is what makes Hilliard wonder just how bad the war is. One aspect of Garrett's change is that he has developed a type of psychosomatic illness, not to be confused with any physical injury, rather of agitation' (p. 34). Hilliard's observation of Garrett's deterioration is a significant addition to the novel's theme of anxiety, while the messy the operation at the Somme actually was cements the tone of cynicism that pervades the remainder of the narrative.

Garrett clearly likes Hilliard and respects his skill as a soldier, enough to try to dissuade Hilliard from sending Hilliard on a gas course, and later he holds a conversation with Hilliard to let him know when Barton is on a potentially dangerous assignment to draw a map of enemy line of opposition to the costly reconnaissance missions on enemy positions, and reveals the military strategists behind the Barmelle Wood operation and 'the Big Push' (p. 96).

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED





### Captain Franklin, Hilliard and Barton

The adjutant Captain Franklin's attitude towards Hilliard and Barton seems quite different. Franklin's cold attitude towards the pair is confirmed when he ignores their offer to go to the café, and Hilliard senses his disapproval is aimed principally at him. Franklin wishes to put Barton on a gas course, seeming to have 'some bee in his bonnet about it' (p. 57). Hilliard believes that Franklin has taken a dislike against Barton from the first night in the officer's quarters, 'his horse-riding Aunt Eustacia' (p. 58), and that he distrusts Hilliard's friendship with Barton. Putting Barton on a week-long course away from the camp is the precursor to how respect Franklin contributes to Hilliard's anxiety. Barton is noticeably more pragmatic than Hilliard. '[Franklin] doesn't seem to like anyone much' (p. 59). It is probable that Hilliard's feelings are exaggerated, as the adjutant takes time to visit the severely wounded Hilliard in the novel.



#### Debate Prompt

1. 'Franklin's effect on Hilliard was profound; Hilliard's effect on Barton was equally profound. To what extent do you agree with this statement?'
2. How does Hilliard's relationship with his family change as the novel progresses? Consider whether his relationship with his family at the end of the novel is more influential on Hilliard's mood as it was at the beginning of the novel.



#### Active Learning Task

1. In groups, compile a list of the main traits of both Hilliard and Barton, and create a Venn diagram. Write a page explaining how the difference(s) between them influences the narrative.



#### Extended Essay Question

1. Explore the ways Hill presents friendship as the antidote to war. In your opinion, how has the author shaped these meanings?



**COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED**



## Genre (AO3)

### The War Novel

*Strange Meeting* is a novel that fully brings home the horrors of trench warfare in 20th century literature concerned with war, Hill's novel focuses on what Catharine Savage Brosnan calls 'the experiential dimension',<sup>12</sup> the experiences and emotions of those involved in the fighting and how they come home. Listed below are some of the conventions of the war novel and how these are used in *Strange Meeting*.

#### Key Points and Indicators

1. Reflections on humanity: Hill is insightful about the dehumanising effects of war. The contusions that people suffer when coming face to face with the full bloody reality of war. Barton's unpredictable response to the bodies in the trenches during his march is a key example.

*He found himself staring in fascination at the slatted heap of limbs and somehow through the front of a tunic at the blood. He felt numb. (p. 101)*

Barton risks his own life immediately afterwards by putting his head above the parapet, seeming to be a gesture of solidarity with those dead around him. The necessity of this action is given a specific philosophical context by Hill, with the allusion to Sir Thomas More's views on life and death which inspire both Barton and Hilliard.

2. The controlling idea: Hill's novel prescribes a meaning to World War I. What is the meaning of love and self-sacrifice of soldiers for each other and how their actions become meaningful independently of the final outcome of a battle or the war in its entirety. In order to balance the competing elements of brutality and altruism that define characters, the novel includes the latter include Garrett's principled attempt to counter the High Command's reconnaissance missions that prove so costly to life, Parkin's attempt to lead the dying Glazier's refusal of the stretcher-bearers' assistance in order to save himself.
3. The action of war: The use of transferable generic elements such as adventure and humour are incorporated into the narrative to convey the perils and complexities of war. Hilliard and Barton feel a sense of adventure at times during their manoeuvres. Hilliard returns to the base camp, comparing it to a school trip, while Barton feels 'empty in his stomach' (p. 100) when he goes out on his first mission. Hilliard's attempt to lead the reconnaissance mission during the chaos of the Big Push (pp. 148–155) is full of suspense and emphasises the horror of the climactic battle scene. There are several instances of dark humour too, notably the incident about bumping into the enemy's reconnaissance team in the darkness.

4. Realism: The representation of real battles, recreating important historical events, and a clear statement about the major lessons of the war are important elements of the war novel. The latter takes the form of many criticisms of strategic commanders, notably in Hilliard's differentiation of cavalry manoeuvres from trench warfare, and his observation that 'every battle since Neuve Chapelle has been some kind of mess but it will take some years until they learn about it' (p. 152). Hilliard's essentially summarises the major strategic failure of the British Army generals in World War I.

#### Contextual Information

There have been many war novels set against the backdrop of World War I, the most prestigious including *War and Peace* (1929) by Erich Maria Remarque; *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) by Ernest Hemingway; *Regiment* by Pat Barker; *Birds of Prey* and *A Long Long Walk*.



#### Defining the Genre

1. How does Hill define the idea that people read war stories to experience courage and overcome intense fear without experiencing any actual danger themselves.
2. Can you think of any scenes in *Strange Meeting* that would seem to be examples of this?



#### Extended Essay Question

1. Assess how effectively Hill captures what life was like for soldiers fighting in the trenches. In preparation for your essay, use the Internet to learn the details of the events of the war. In your answer, focus on how the author has shaped meanings.

<sup>12</sup> Catharine Savage Brosnan, 'The Functions of War Literature', *South Central Review* 9:1 (1992), p. 10.

## Themes (AO1)

### War

As stated in the previous section, Hill's novel offers a prescriptive treatment of war, giving it meaning by portraying the camaraderie, honour and valour of the soldiers. Combatants such as Barton, Garrett, Hilliard, Parkin, Coulter and Glazier are worthy superiors and the political architects of the conflict often are not. There is a clear impetus for Hill to have the reader emotionally engage with the plight of the soldiers in general, and in particular that of Barton: Barton's certain death creates a greater impact than would the story of the hundreds of thousands of soldiers who died in the conflict.

Hill's narrative rejects the clichés about war while cautioning against an unrealistic view of war. Barton's loss is all the more poignant to the reader because, despite his emotional fatalism, he is still idealistic enough to believe that 'there will never be another war' (p. 14). Hilliard, on the other hand, is a rational pessimist who believes that the war is a necessary evil and that 'Men are naturally stupid and they do not learn from experience' (p. 14). At the level of individual consciousness, something can only be salvaged from war through the level of individual consciousness and contemplation. His memory of the anonymous tormented Field-Gunner in the hospital is a reminder that there are countless other soldiers in a war when some of his fellow men lose so much or injury. Even brave patriots such as Garrett and Coulter know that war produces

Finally, Hill's novel unequivocally condemns the practice and politics of war. From the Big Push, Hill brings home the horror of war in fine detail: the horrific images of trench rats feasting on the corpses; the constant back-breaking digging and reforming; the emotional breakdowns of the Field-Gunner and Harris; men reduced to the behaviour of animals as they eat their bellies through the mud and filth on hopeless reconnaissance missions. The novel's treatment of war, with specific reference to the strategic disaster of the High Command's 'Surprise' and the need to adapt existing battlefield tactics to the new, harsh realities of trench warfare: the immortal words of Private Parkin.

### Home

One of the key factors that define the oppositional nature of the character pairing is the great difference in their respective upbringings and sense of home. Hilliard's attitude towards home and being in England more generally is one of bitterness seasoned with nostalgia. Barton's childhood home is one that he questions himself.

*He had been born here. The windows were tall and blank. It meant nothing that he had somehow failed, because of that. Tomorrow he was rejoining his regiment. In his mind, then, that he might never see this house again? (p. 14)*

Hilliard's apparent indifference to his home life may help him cope with the dangers of war, but he is unable to separate himself from the deaths of soldiers and can sympathise for the families of the fallen, becoming overwhelming on their account. Barton feels quite the opposite about his family at every opportunity, and his extensive detailing of the atrocious conditions of his home in a long letter at the outset of Book Three, conveys the dominant feeling among the soldiers (p. 120). An example of this desire in Barton's case is his request of his family to send reproductions of Turner paintings to remind him of the beauty of his countryside, 'some removed from this dun, grey, muddy scenery' (p. 125).

By bridging the disparate views of home between the two characters, Hill moves the narrative to the conclusion of the novel. Barton's warm memories of his childhood and his home play a major role in his emotional and psychological rehabilitation. The dream of returning home, of swimming with Barton as a child at his home instead of visiting him in the hospital, is a new connection with home that Barton's friendship has awarded him. Visiting Barton's home, a landmark, road and signpost 'exactly as David had described it' (p. 164). By immersing himself in home life, Hilliard will hopefully be able to renew the equally important connection with his home.

The characters' attitudes toward 'Home' are presented using different methods, reflecting their differences. Barton is still completely engaged with his family and his thoughts of home, and he communicates intimately with his family through extensive letter writing, revealing his sense of home. Hilliard, on the other hand, mostly transmits his identity of home through his letters, suggesting the distant, fading relationship he currently has with his home.

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED



## Anxiety

Anxiety is an important theme in *Strange Meeting*, and another idea that lies at the heart of the novel is the nature of friendship. Early in the narrative, Hilliard is 'afraid of going to sleep' (p. 2) and behaves irrationally, resenting Crawford largely on the basis of childhood dislike, and (perhaps due to his mother and sister's behaviour). While Hilliard is waiting for the train at Victoria (p. 3), the reader sees further evidence of his anxiety: there is 'nothing that he could do in an attempt to not appear conspicuously at a loose end he buys a walking stick that he does not read and an orange that he does not eat. Although his post-traumatic stress is that of the unnamed Field-Gunner or Private Harris, Hilliard's anxiety is sufficient to affect his everyday tasks and situations with clarity of purpose. Later, the reader is told that Hilliard has 'some anxiety which had been coiled up within him' (p. 52), which confirms that Hilliard's anxiety of other people have been caused by environmental factors specific to the war. The long and unpredictable effects of anxiety on those engaged in war include Garret's psychosomatic limp, which 'seemed not to be the result of any physical injury, rather Barton's newly haunted eyes and 'grainy' appearance' (p. 80) flesh after Harris's death.

Barton's relationship to Hilliard's anxiety extends beyond his impact on Hilliard to the predicament of Private Harris, whom he manages to pull out of a distressed foetal position from the cellar of the house at Leuvry. Barton's emotional intelligence is used by Hill as a counter to the officially prescribed stiff upper lip ethos of the armed forces. However, the benefit of Barton's approach proves short-lived as he falls back on the army remedy of a shot of brandy as the best cure for Harris's condition. Additionally, in the wake of his horrifying experiences Barton's action takes on some of the irrationality of Hilliard's early in the narrative. His aforementioned recklessness in raising himself above the trench parapet is the first example, while his urges to laugh out loud during the reconnaissance mission and his rescue of the hedgehog may strike some readers as unduly whimsical actions in the circumstances. Tellingly, during the Big Push, Hilliard finds Barton's comparison of the approach to Querrone to 'a Turner canvas' (p. 147) a cause for concern, from which the reader may infer that the latter's character is proving erratic. This is confirmed by the 'almost hysterical sense of pleasure' Barton feels anticipating 'a perfect battle' (p. 148) that will turn out to be quite the opposite.

**Context**  
**Shell**  
 The trench warfare of the First World War, the conditions of trench placement, the physical and psychological situations (e.g. gas, being buried alive). Today's war, the impact of modern warfare on the lives of soldiers, the impact of war on women, the impact of war on the environment, the impact of war on the economy, the impact of war on the world.

## Love

The relationship between Hilliard and Barton progresses explicitly from friendship to love with Barton's statement to Hilliard, 'I love you, John' (p. 117). Hilliard has already been shown to feel 'A warm pleasure, a sensation of being comfortable' (p. 85) in Barton's presence, and so it is already clear that the two men have strong feelings for one another, and that the intensity of their feelings is the product of the dramatic life and death circumstances of the war. The relationship is an example of **Platonic love**, one based on spiritual rather than physical or romantic connection.



### Debate Prompt

1. How does Hill's extensive use of memories influence our understanding of the relationship? Pay particular attention to the difference between Hilliard's and Barton's perspectives.
2. 'Love is like war: easy to begin but very hard to stop.' To what extent do you think the relationship between Hilliard and Barton mirror the war in *Strange Meeting*?



### Extended Essay Question

1. Evaluate whether *Strange Meeting* is more a story about love than war. How does the author construct a feeling of ambiguity in the reader's mind about whether love is the central theme of her novel? In your answer, focus on how the author has shaped meaning through language.

**COPYRIGHT  
 PROTECTED**



## Attitudes and Values (AO3)

### Social Class

Certain characters in the novel, such as Constance and the Major, promote middle-class values that are exposed to be inadequate to understanding the social and psychological

It is no coincidence that Susan Hill named the novel's bearer of outdated Victorian values a Latin word from which her name derives,<sup>13</sup> she is a character who is very much more of a product of Victorian England, an era that was characterised by its stiff upper lip attitude and its emphasis on duty. As a consequence, she is incapable of offering her son emotional support and of understanding his feelings. Even though the stationmaster has suffered the tragedy of losing his son in the war, she is unable to understand why Kemble cannot take 'a pride in things' (p. 23) and allows the stationmaster to believe that Constance's world is one that places a value on things, and that she is a certain way.

*She looked as if she would never let go of her position, and would never allow herself to loosen her dress or a spot of dirt left on her sleeve. She did not stand still beside him but moved about, casting a long, long shadow. (p. 23)*

However, Constance's behaviour and attitudes belong to a society that does not know that this war was not fought in the romantic and heroic manner she imagines. In this respect, Constance is the product of a system rather than the problem itself. Her actions cannot be totally forgiven simply because she is an anonymous member of the public, not in the same position and yet are able to act and *feel* more appropriately.

### Anti-war Sentiment

*Strange Meeting* is not a polemical anti-war narrative, rather a despairing lament. However, a good deal of the narrative is devoted to criticism of the military strategy and the dreadful loss of life that characterised the war. Barton's letters become increasingly critical as the narrative progresses, such as when he criticises the constant digging of trenches as 'pointless work' (p. 119). The reader is spared little in the way of detail about the horrors of war, 'evil' rats feasting on the corpses, details which heighten the reader's sympathy for the soldiers. The poor light on the judgement of the High Command and the callousness of the politicians. When Barton talks about his imprisoned 'conchy' brother, Edward, he speaks of him with a sense of injustice as having 'put up a terrific fight, and he's having a rotten time' (p. 47). The war is a heartless oppressors, whatever the justification for the campaign may be.

Perhaps the most serious criticism of the military strategy in France is the rescinding of orders by the Commanding Officer. Garrett's anger at the failure of 'the Big Push' (p. 96) is revealed when he is seen to be veiled at all' (p. 97). It surprises Hilliard that such a seasoned professional officer would do this in front of one of his lieutenants, but Garrett's 'sarcasm' and 'disbelief' reflect his own allegiance to the men in his charge. Garrett is relieved of his duties when he refuses to undertake more perilous and unproductive 'reconnaissance' (p. 139), and is replaced by a man who expresses no such qualms and sends thousands of British soldiers to their deaths at Querrone.

### Patriotism

Hilliard's encounter with Coulter, is an interesting example of a patriotic voice in the novel. Coulter is a man of courage and decency, or 'A man after the hearts of all generals, politicians and recruiting officers' (p. 29), who Hilliard struggles to remember any details about. Coulter seems dutiful and patriotic to the reader, until Hilliard remembers that he is an orphan who had once joined the circus.

*His only letters came from a friend and his wife who travelled England with the circus. Coulter was a happy man, self-sufficient, small and hard as a nut. (p. 31)*

<sup>13</sup> Constance is derived from the Latin 'constantem' – 'standing firm, steadfast, unchanging'.

The reader learns that Coulter entertains the others by juggling crockery and glass, 'aggressive about the war, still patriotic and still confident, in spite of all he had seen of the generals and his immediate command, while voicing the occasional 'bad word' and the reader is reminded of Coulter's commitment to his country later during Hilliard's speech on the pointlessness of the war ('for him [Coulter] it is a just war, he'll go on till he drops'). The letter that begins Part Three ('Coulter gives us his pep talk, about how we are going to win' [p. 122]). In the latter part of the letter, referring to their entrenched position in the trenches, Barton complains that Coulter 'can't wait to get his bayonet stuck into someone, more so because he is basically such a nice chap' (p. 124). The reader has witnessed Coulter's leadership and conviviality, and is liable to share Barton's opinion, especially after Coulter is killed while leading the men too near the enemy position. Barton's admission of feeling guilty for not warning Coulter too readily to his probable death is followed by his description of Coulter's death (p. 137), which suggests someone quite different from the stereotypical gung-ho



**Debate Prompt**

1. Considering his death and the manner of it, is there a message or lesson to be learned in the worth of the British campaign?
2. Can an 'implied author' be detected in the narrative (i.e. does it support a particular world view)?



**Active Learning Task**

1. Write a letter from Barton to his family shortly after he arrives in France, describing his surroundings and fellow soldiers, particularly Hilliard. The letter should reflect and mirror his attitude during this period, capturing Hill's use of language and the character.

INSPECTION COPY

**COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED**



## The Writer's Use of Language (AQA)

### Rhetorical Devices

Hill uses **rhetorical** devices in the narrative at times to emphasise certain points, or to reinforce a theme. The use of **rhetorical** language is sparing but effective, reflecting the tendency of their narratives to show the reader events in scenes rather than explain them in summary.

### Figures of Repetition

#### Key Examples

1. At the start of the novel, Barton's anxiety is conveyed by the **rhetorical** device of a series of lines, phrases, clauses or sentences with the same word or words.

*He was **afraid of going to sleep**. For three weeks, he had been **afraid of going to sleep**. ... he recalled also the trick he had used as a child to **keep himself awake**. He wanted to stay **awake**. (p. 2)*

2. The **rhetorical** device of **enumeration**, or the step-by-step listing of words and phrases, is used to emphasise the monotony and unproductive nature of the drills.

*... a succession of drills and parades and inspections, lectures, exercises, demonstrations, bayonet and trench mortar practices. Many of them were resented simply because they were so boring.*

3. Hill aims at times for a degree of uncertainty in her descriptions, which communicates the confusion characters face in making sense of the events around them. The following example uses **antithesis** at the end of the sentence to achieve this effect in relation to the actions of Harris.

*He was not moving but making a continuous, agonised noise, a cry or a moan.*

The use of **antithesis** here draws attention to the disturbing, other-worldly nature of Harris's terror.

### Figurative Language

*Strange Meeting* contains **motifs**, **symbolism** and imagery that illuminate the novel's themes.

### Key Motifs

**Motifs** are recurring literary elements (e.g. image, object, word/phrase, idea, action) that reinforce a theme and help to create narrative cohesion. **Motifs** can have a symbolic meaning, and the associations they come to represent something more than themselves.

#### Key Motif #1: Memory

Memories of the past form a significant part of the narratives of both main characters, as they help to reinforce their humanity by keeping in touch with their lives before the war. However, these memories also have a healing function, as best illustrated by Hilliard's fond remembrance of his sister, which helps to ease the change he perceives in her when he returns to England.

#### Examples: Hilliard

1. Hilliard remembers his time in the hospital, with flashbacks to Crawford and his mother.
2. Hilliard remembers his childhood swims with Beth and sleeping in her room at home, which helps him to collect owl pellets.
3. The scene in the hospital reminds Hilliard of dead bodies: 'He did not retch at the sight of them, he was in his old room above the rose garden' (p. 9).

#### Examples: Barton

1. Barton shares his thoughts about his aunt and his siblings with Hilliard and this is reflected in his vivid memories.
2. Barton requests his favourite records and literature from home, as well as pictures of the countryside, in order to keep his memories of home alive.

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED



## Key Motif #2: Boundaries

Boundaries are a recurring image in the narrative, representing the separation (both physical and emotional) between the danger of the front line and life at home. In the beach scene at Hawton, Hilliard's line between his home and whatever else waits for him once he returns to France is the tide and the sand complements his desire to leave his family behind.

*The tide was right out, so that he had to wade through mounds of loose sand and satisfying under the soles of his feet. (p. 9)*

This is an example of a form of **personification** known as '**pathetic fallacy**', where human qualities are reflected in things that are not human, such as nature or inanimate objects. Hilliard's personification is reflected in the behaviour of the sea as it 'moved about, turning over and back upon itself' (p. 9).

The novel also ends with an example of **pathetic fallacy** when again complements the weather as Bennett drives Hilliard to the Barton house. The narrator observes that 'The sky was very blue' (p. 165). The weather parallels the emotional darkness of the recent past that Hilliard has experienced.

## Key Motif #3: The Sea

The sea forms a **motif** early in the narrative, offering Hilliard a hint of freedom, or escape, as 'thin and gold as a snail's trail where the moon lay along its ridge' (p. 9); and the major's study, 'Hilliard saw the thin gold line of the sea, and the heat shimmered on its surface. The elusiveness of Hilliard's freedom is again conveyed by the **motif** of the sea:

*The sea moved about, turning over and back upon itself at the shore line. (p. 9)*

In this instant Hilliard imagines that he can hear the distant gunfire from France, a **pathetic fallacy**, with the sea's restlessness mimicking Hilliard's own. **Pathetic fallacy** is used to describe Hilliard's remembered freedom when swimming with Beth as children, 'the sea' (p. 15). The description of the sea as 'milky green' (p. 15) a few paragraphs later reflects the and naivety of the young siblings at play.

## Key Motif #4: The Sky

Recurring images of the sky are used in a similar way to those of the sea, to offer Hilliard a sense of freedom or escape from the horrors of war. At the farm where the troops are stationed, Hilliard goes to a loft bedroom to see 'the roof light was propped open, showing a square of damson sky. Hilliard hears gunfire and makes the association with the gunfire he had heard 'more clearly at Hawton, when the wind was blowing off the sea' (p. 33). Later, with a sense of freedom and company, there is a use of **pathetic fallacy** when Hilliard stands at a trench dugout and 'a thin, flat blue and high overhead a lark hovered and trembled, singing' (p. 86). Hilliard cannot or cannot observe the vast expanse of the sky and its sense of limitless freedom, just as his freedom is limited.

## Semantic Fields

Semantic fields are sets of words linked to a specific subject or concept. Like **motifs**, they focus the mind on a theme, and they often incorporate other linguistic devices such as examples of **personification, symbolism and metonymy**.

## The Sense of Smell

The **motif** of memory is supported by a **semantic field** relating to the sense of smell. The sense of smell spurs the memory in the most immediate way. In his nightmares Hilliard experiences the smell, of soil, chlorine and blood, and the mustard gas like garlic' (p. 9). The scene in the bedroom becomes intolerable for him, suggesting that there may be some bad experiences of flowers from the war. The **semantic field** is developed further with the 'old smell' that lingers in the Major's home and on his housekeeper daughter and his bulldog. Clearly, these smells with those of death and decay that Hilliard has experienced in France. For example, 'the briny smell' (p. 12) of the sea reminds Hilliard of his childhood summer holidays. The 'smell of roses' (p. 22) continues to adversely affect him. Later, when out walking with Bartley, Hilliard is reminded on the need to remember the experience, to remember 'the usual sounds and smells' (p. 45). However, it seems 'too insubstantial to be remembered' (p. 45). This suggests that the memory prompt has itself been triggered by its traumatic associations with the war.

**COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED**





## Loss of Paradise

There are several descriptions of a sully of nature by the activity of the war, and of the loss of a natural paradise. When Barton and Hilliard are out walking together 'the tree trunks were like pewter' (p. 45), suggesting that the wood has become transformed into alloys to be widely found at army camps in weaponry, basins, cans and other armaments. On earth is given a more explicit biblical context in descriptions of the constant digging of trenches, which is symbolic of the futility of the company's operations, as 'their [digging] breaking it all down' (p. 121). The vivid descriptions of the appalling battle conditions described by Barton ('No more than 150 yards away from the enemy' [p. 118]) as

*... it doesn't look like a land made by either God or man, it was thrown up by devils with no sense of anything but chaos. (p. 120)*

In this simulation of hell, the toiling soldiers are implicitly compared to devils or damned souls in fiery pits and to eternal damnation.

In his final letter home, Barton reflects on the toll of the war on the trees, natural life in the country, and poses the rhetorical question: 'What right have we to do such damage?' His decision to shoot the ill-treated hedgehog is doubtlessly the result of this expressive

## Symbolism

The downed German pilot who Barton and Hilliard discover in the orchard symbolises war, and perhaps even the war itself. The loss of innocence due to trauma and the deficiencies of High Command are both alluded to in the description of the 'plum' which is undamaged while 'the rest of his body, up to the chest and arms, was almost burnt'. Hilliard wonders why the plane was so slow to burn, and why the pilot had been unable to escape his horrendous death. Nothing seems to go according to plan in this war.

## Style: Syntax

The stylistic deviations in the narrative voice create a disjointed feel to the narrative, reflecting an erratic thought process and perspective of the protagonist. Hilliard's general lack of communication is shown through disjointed or fractured sentence structure, where sentences are often broken up, incomplete and lacking conjunctions. Another feature of the language is that sentences are often words tagged on as an afterthought, such as in the following example.

*He read them, read between the lines, read the Casualty Lists. Imagined. Kept*

Stylistic deviation is also evident in barely grammatical or obscure sentences. An example is 'What kind of' considering how little he actually knows about his mother.

*Her hands were folded together, palm to palm, in front of her. What kind of*

This sense of an unfinished thought reflects Hilliard's own difficulty in communicating his feelings and a general uncertainty about what lies in store for him.



## Debate Prompt

1. In groups, discuss how successful you think Hill's use of disjointed syntax is. Do you clearly recognise it as a symptom of Hilliard's experience?



## Active Learning Task

1. In the style of Susan Hill, write an epilogue for *Strange Meeting* which includes the other characters after the end of the novel. The epilogue should summarise the narrative, and build on the development of the character.
2. In groups, use the Internet to learn of common symptoms of shell shock and other symptoms that affected soldiers returning from war. Create a two-column table with one column for symptoms and examples of these symptoms where applicable in the novel.

**COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED**



## Form (AO2)

*Strange Meeting* is mostly told in a linear and chronological sequence, though the novel also incorporates letters and memoranda as devices to respectively provide backstory or (often ironic) commentary on the narrative action. While Barton's outfit is marching towards Feuvry, for example, a short memorandum is suddenly inserted into the narrative, serving as a type of ironic understatement about the difficulties to be encountered in the devastated town.

B  
b  
o  
d

*Memorandum. Commanding Officer to 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion*

'At Feuvry we shall be in close billets. Guards will be made at once. Great precautions taken for drinking water and sanitation.' (p. 69)

Equally, the letters included are an important formal element of the text. Barton uses this device to provide background information and details that would impede the flow of the story as the state of the surroundings or the mood of the camp. The letters between Hilliard and Barton towards the end of the novel are responsible for revealing one of the most important aspects of the fate of Barton. In addition, the letters also document Barton's deteriorating spirit and Hilliard's developing personal skills; while the reader is given little detail regarding Barton's family, at least they *are* written.

### Narrative Voice

The novel employs **third-person omniscient narration**, which means that the thoughts and feelings of certain characters are conveyed by a voice that is external to the events of the narrative. **The extradiegetic narrator** tells the story as they observe it, without actively participating in it at the time.

Extradiegetic narrator tells the story actively

The narrative point of view is split between Hilliard and Barton, with more time devoted to Barton's point of view is introduced at the beginning of Part Two, offering the reader a different perspective on unfolding events through the eyes of someone with a very different world view from Barton. This is distinct from the rest of the narrative in being written in the first person, which borrows from diary correspondence and emphasises Barton's intimacy with his family.

Leaving aside our knowledge of the author, the narrative voice at times hints at a different perspective, mostly when the narrative conveys Barton's point of view and also is due to the conversations between Hilliard, during which they ask each other about their feelings, discuss and clarify their emotions. For example, Hilliard's question to Barton: 'Has it always been like that for you to love people? To get on with them, to bring them out and do the right things and so on?' conversational patterns are certainly more characteristic of women than men.

COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED



### Active Learning

1. Find four examples of memoranda on pages 66, 69, and twice on page 78. Write a sentence or two about each one, focusing on some action or aspect of the narrative. In groups, create a table with four columns. Write the title of each memorandum in the first column to all four examples of memoranda, with an explanation of its significance in the second column.



INSPECTION COPY

## Structure (AO2)

*Strange Meeting* is mostly told in a linear and chronological sequence. However, in addition to the use of memoranda and letters to interrupt the sequence, the **linear narrative** is also disrupted by **time shifts** which accommodate Hilliard's memories. These memories are generally of home and childhood, but a notable use of **time shift** occurs at the novel's outset, where time shifts from the present in Hilliard's bed at home to his hospital bed where he is tended by Crawford. Another striking use of the technique is Hilliard's detailed flashback to the distressing encounter with the desperate, rambling Field-Gunner who 'lay mutter catch, except now and again a fragment about "the green light, the green light"' – the sudden manner of its introduction deliver a truly harrowing reminder of the casualties.

*Strange Meeting* is divided into three parts. The first is written from John Hilliard's perspective, the second mostly from David Barton's and the third includes the points of view of both.

### Structure of the Novel in Terms of Plot Analysis

The novel's structure in more strictly in terms of its plot analysis is as follows.

- Initial situation: Hilliard in England recuperating from an injury. He is anxious, alienated from and suspicious of other people. At home he feels trapped with his experiences, and alienated from his family members who he imagines have returned to the war.
- Conflict: Hilliard returns to his battalion to find most of his fellows have died and this inspires and uplifts Hilliard, giving him his first experience of openness and integrity.
- Complication: Barton's bad experience during his map-drawing expedition and this causes a change in his outlook, which Hilliard succeeds in correcting.
- Suspense/climax: The Big Push, the massacre of British soldiers and Hilliard's role in it.
- Denouement: Barton dead, Hilliard loses a leg as a result of his wounds.
- Conclusion: Hilliard's new perspective on life after returning home and travelling.



### Active Learning Task

1. Imagine what events may have occurred before the story began, particularly in the lead-up to the war. Outline these events according to the plot analysis format used above. You may use the Internet to assist you with the history of the war.

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED



## Contextual Analysis (AO3)

### The Literary Context

War literature has been written from classical times to the present day, and differs in different ways. For example, classical works such as Homer's *Iliad* (8 BC) and Virgil's *Aeneid* (29 BC) glorify and romanticise battle and death, whereas the Old English saga *Beowulf* (AD 10) focuses on the title character, and denounces cowardly behaviour.

The nineteenth century saw a change in the description of war, with novels such as Stendhal's *The Charterhouse of Parma* (1839) and Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) focusing more on the individual soldier rather than heroic battles. The most famous war novel of the nineteenth century was Leo Tolstoy's immense and influential text *War and Peace* (1869), which is widely considered as one of the greatest novels ever produced and is applauded for its truthful depiction of battle. *War and Peace* had a significant influence on the war novel, with its extensive insight into the human condition influencing many of the war novelists of the following century.

The magnitude of World War I meant it was responsible for a massive influx of war literature. The most famous literature produced during the war came from a number of poets called the war poets, young British soldiers (and others from different countries) whose work was marked by realistic and horrific depictions of war. Famous war poets included Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, who are typically held to be the leading war poets, as well as Rupert Brooke, Charles Sorley, Robert Graves and many others. One of the most famous war poems from this period was 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' by Wilfred Owen, which encapsulates the horror and futility of war.

#### 'Anthem for Doomed Youth'

*What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?  
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.  
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle  
Can patter out their hasty orisons.  
No mockeries for them; no prayers nor bells,  
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,—  
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;  
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.  
What candles may be held to speed them all?  
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes  
Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.  
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;  
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,  
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.*

Susan Hill adopted the title of this poem by Wilfred Owen, 'Stranger at the Front' is discussed in the 'Background' section of this resource.

The war also influenced many novels, exploring the horrific brutal and psychological effects it had on soldiers. World War I novels from this period included Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Henry Barrows' *Stranger at the Front*, which both highlight the physical and psychological effects endured by soldiers, the futility and expendability of human life, and the horrors of the brutality of war. *Stranger at the Front* sent a strong anti-war message.

Although written in the early 1930s, over 50 years after the end of the war, *Stranger at the Front* captures the emotional experience of war, as well as the psychological effects. Indeed, we occasionally see the effects of war in Hilliard's struggle to connect to his life at home just before the war. Although our immediate reaction is to classify *Stranger Meeting* as a war novel, the relationship between Hilliard and Barton means that it may be read as a love story, and without the war it would be easier to do so.

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED



## The Historical Context

### World War I: An Unprecedented War

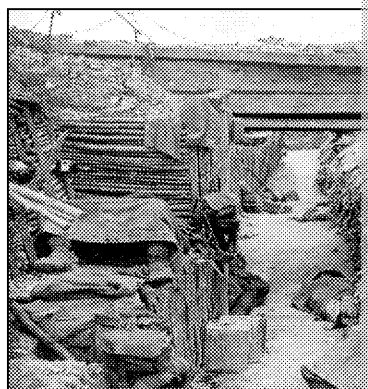
The setting of the novel is, of course, World War I. Beginning 1914 and ending in 1918 (known before World War II) devastated Europe and shook it to its core. 17 million people were killed, countless more were injured, and it resulted in major political shifts throughout the world.

The war was fought between two assembled alliances of countries, the 'allies' and the 'central powers'. The 'allies' began with the original 'triple entente' of the British and Russian empires. The 'central powers' consisted of the German and Austro-Hungarian empires. Both sides were joined by more countries as the war progressed, with many countries of the world at one point or another. There were too many countries involved to list them all, but a non-comprehensive overview is provided below.

The Central Powers	The Allies
German Empire	British Empire
Austro-Hungarian Empire	French Republic
Ottoman Empire	Russian Empire
Kingdom of Bulgaria (1915–1918)	Second Boer Republic
	Italy
	United States
	Romania
	Greece
	Portugal

### Life in the Trenches

Military combat relied heavily on trench warfare during World War I, which is the same type of combat as Barton and Hilliard engage in at the end of *Strange Meeting*. A trench was a 12-foot deep dugout that was designed to effectively protect the soldiers from artillery fire. Both sides of the war utilised trenches, which were separated by a field and ranged anywhere from 50 feet to half a mile apart from one another. Though trenches offered comparatively good protection, they were responsible for many deaths. Soldiers had to go over the top and advance toward the enemy trench, leaving themselves dangerously exposed as the enemy could simply fire at the large number of men advancing toward the trench.



An example of a trench during World War I.

### Conditions

Battle was not the only problem for soldiers to contend with. An estimated two million soldiers died from disease throughout and subsequent to the war. Soldiers were required to live in appalling conditions, and it isn't an exaggeration to say that the threat of disease rivalled that of enemy soldiers. The threat came from rats that would feed on the bodies of the dead and then spread the germs, and from the lack of food and clean water. Frogs, beetles and slugs were also found in the trench. One of the less visible but equally threatening facts of war was trench fever, a painful flu-like illness caused by lice. Damp conditions and caused gangrene to the legs, often resulting in amputation.

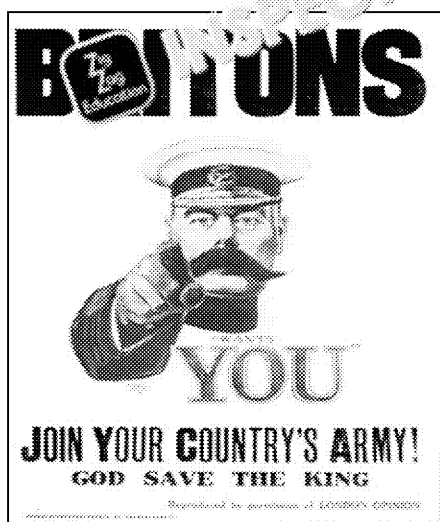
**COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED**



## Why Go to War?

Having read an account of the conditions you might wonder why anybody would go to war, but many young men did just that, for many reasons.

- **Pal's battalions** – Whole towns were encouraged to sign up for the war together, alongside friends and peer pressure to do so made signing up an appealing prospect.
- **They didn't know what they were signing up for** – Many people misjudged the conditions of war, believing it would go smoothly and that the boys would be home by Christmas. Nobody realised that the war would last for four years. Equally, the young men who were signing up had little idea of what they were signing up for: they had a romantic image of war as noble and patriotic, and not of the human suffering in appalling conditions.
- **Cowardice** – Conscientious objectors to war (those who refused to fight) were a small number of British men are listed as 'COs' during World War I. However, men who didn't fight were branded cowards by an unforgiving public. There are cases of objectors being treated as women as a symbol of cowardice, and their men often felt pressured to sign up to avoid their manhood questioned.



1914 recruitment posters

A man's decision to go to war was taken out of his hands in 1916 when conscription was introduced by the Military Service Act, as it was called, meant that men aged between 18 and 41 could be called up to fight. There were exceptions made for men who were married and those in certain industries. The age range for conscription changed significantly during the war, and by 1918 men aged between 17 and 51 could be called up, regardless of marital status.

## Effects of the War

Few people who had not seen it for themselves could understand the effects of war. They had the knowledge that any moment could be their last. They had witnessed the horror of war, the men shot or blown away by a shell. They had been required to bury the dead bodies of their comrades on battlefields and throw them into mass graves along with hundreds of others.

Given these details, it is unsurprising that soldiers would suffer psychological consequences. A common condition was shell shock, which is known to have been widespread during the war. It was a psychological reaction to the horrific sights seen during battle, and exhibited symptoms of extreme distress: those affected were often unable to sleep, talk, or function as normal. Symptoms usually lasted for a few days, but chronic sufferers were common too, with many still suffering the effects of shell shock long after the war ended. Because little was known about shell shock there was a lack of sympathy for soldiers returning home: men were often labelled as 'weak' or 'cowards' by people who had never experienced the war. In *Strange Meeting*, Harris appears to be suffering from shell shock when he breaks down.

**COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED**



### Active Learning Task

1. Imagine you must deliver a speech at Barton's funeral. Write an outline of his character and life.

## Literary Approaches (AO5)

### Psychoanalytical Theory

It is possible to analyse *Strange Meeting* using psychoanalytical theory. The reading techniques initially developed by Sigmund Freud to interpret his patients' dreams can be used when reading literature to seek out the underlying motivations of the author or to analyse the narrative content. An application of some relevant psychoanalytical concepts to key narrative events is provided here.

#### i. **The unconscious mind: conscious and subconscious behaviour**

Memories and dreams, most specifically in relation to Hilliard's characterisation, are important vehicles for revealing the traumatic impact of the war. At the very outset of the narrative, for example, there is mention of 'a room of some old, familiar sound or smell' (p. 2) in 'bringing the memory. In Hilliard's case, the smell of Major's home will disturb and repel the traumatised man because they are the smell of the dead and of corpses. The smell of the sea, conversely, affords Hilliard a childhood memory of his father. While his memory of the sea itself is tied into his childhood swimming career, he identified a persistent sense of smell as a mechanism of repression and keep hidden a traumatising event. In medical terms, the connection between smell may be explicable in terms of the anatomy of the brain and how that affects memory, however, Hill uses this Freudian connection between smell and memory, to reveal Hilliard throughout the novel.<sup>14</sup>

Hilliard's trauma is revealed very early in the narrative by memories that seem to be triggered by sensory experiences. The water pipes in the Methodist Hall where he took dancing lessons, 'intestines' (p. 3), one of the most horrific visions that a soldier might encounter, and dramatic flashback to the Field-Gunner in the hospital ward represents the surface of his consciousness, as this is the memory of an actual traumatic event. The memory of the injured man. These memories reflect another Freudian idea about memory and sense of loss,<sup>15</sup> in this case Hilliard's sense of his loss of innocence.

This sense of loss may also be implied in the dream substitution of swimming with Beth near the novel's conclusion.

... she turned, laughing, and it was not Beth after all, it was David Barton and

Barton has helped Hilliard reconnect with his innocence as experienced in childhood, but lost with the severance of the sibling relationship.

#### ii. **Sibling psychology and Beth, the Oedipus complex and the incestuous relationship with Hilliard**

A Freudian analyst or literary critic would immediately identify a subconscious relationship with his female family members. This conclusion is particularly supported by the mention of a traditional romantic interest in Hilliard's life. The overtone of incestuous undertone in young Hilliard's secret nocturnal visits to Beth's bedroom ('the nights he had come under the covers and come to sleep there' [p. 18]) is perhaps too obvious to elaborate. It is another pleasant memory for Hilliard and one triggered by a sound, the rustle of

Perhaps the strongest indicator of Hilliard's unusual love for his sister is his reaction to learning that she is to marry, 'that his sister had changed, had altogether gone. It seems like the perspective of a jilted lover, because the supposed change in her

Context

Further

Detailed

For a user

M H Abrams  
Terms (F  
Publishers

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED



<sup>14</sup> For an article linking the sense of smell, memory and post-traumatic disorders, see: E Vermetten, 'A sensory reminder in posttraumatic stress disorder: case reports and review', *The Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 1997, pp. 114–120.

<sup>15</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the connection between memories and loss, see: H W Loewald, *Psychoanalytic Theory: The Self and the Object World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 148–173.

marital and sexual context. In addition, the aforementioned dream where Hilliard instead of his sister might be interpretable as a repressed idea (his illicit physical relationship with his mother during childhood) being transformed by means of another substituted image (his mother as an adult, Barton).

Hilliard's relationship with his mother also has sexual overtones, with his close observation of the physical changes in her, the type of clothes she prefers to wear, and how she views herself socially, and his thoughts on her beauty. A psychoanalytical reading of the novel would prioritise the role of the **Oedipus complex** in Hilliard's characterisation. The **Oedipus complex** is Freud's term for the necessary stage in the psychosocial development of children, where the male child unconsciously wishes to sleep with his mother (and vice versa, in the case of the female child, the **Electra complex**), and views the same as a rival for her affections. Freud considered the **Oedipus complex** to be a 'nuclear complex', one that will determine the sexual behaviour of the child in adulthood depending on how successfully it is navigated. This idea might shed some light on Hilliard and Barton's characterisations in terms of their theoretical homosexuality, as Freud would attribute this to arrested sexual development.

In the novel, Hilliard and his mother seem to maintain a mutual emotional distance. However, two episodes in the narrative from Hilliard's perspective carry romantic connotations regarding Constance. The first occurs as Hilliard prepares to return to the front, and observes his mother in close detail as they stand 'far apart from one another in the morning room' (p. 20). Hilliard tells Constance 'You look as if you were going to a wedding, mother', before reflecting 'Though in truth she might always have been dressed for some wedding' (p. 21). A Freudian analysis might deduce that the wedding in question was Constance's own (in effect, that she was not already married) and Hilliard is subconsciously projecting his unacceptable desire for her onto her. The second episode occurs in the military hospital near the novel's end, where Hilliard notices Constance that she 'always looks very beautiful' and 'She inclined her head, in a manner that is meant to be read as either regal or contemptuous or both. Hilliard notices her hair in detail and the appreciative looks of the other male patients as she goes away to look out the window.

**iii. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in Barton and Harris**

Barton and Harris display symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a reaction to a traumatic experience someone suffers in their life. Freud proposed that trauma which the patient fails to confront out of fear can be converted into neurotic symptoms, such as erratic, reckless behaviour after witnessing the young private die at his feet. For Hilliard, the beginning of an adverse change in his personality. There is a physical component to this, a 'small sore' (p. 121) on his foot that he originally feels to be unworthy of mention, but which he notices discolouration. However, the main manifestation of PTSD in Hilliard is his withdrawal into himself occurs when he is entering into his final battle. First, he prepares himself for the place of imminent battle by comparing it to 'a Turner canvas' (p. 147), something that is beautiful and safe, an act of **repression**, keeping the pleasure principle alive by denying or distorting a dangerous reality. Secondly, Barton feels 'this almost hysterical sense of pleasure

**Oedipus complex** – a stage in the psychosexual development where the male child unconsciously wishes to sleep with his mother and to view his father with intense hostility.

**Electra complex** – a stage in the psychosexual development where the female child wishes to complement her father and to view her mother as a rival for his affections.

**Projection** – in psychoanalysis, a process during which a person attributes their own unacceptable thoughts and emotions to other people.

**Repression** – Freud's term for the process of pushing thoughts, feelings, or memories out of conscious awareness and into the unconscious.

**Freud's 3 stages of the ego** – the infantile stage (maximum pleasure), the rational stage (reality principle), and the superego (moral principle).

**COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED**





perfect battle, so easy, effortless' (p. 148) as he is about to enter into combat. This is a sense of Freudian **repression** or the forgetting of a painful reality, that of war and death. Hill 'felt as though he were standing outside himself, and was surprised at this reaction' (p. 148). This is obviously a sense of estrangement from reality which a Freudian would recognise as denial (*Verleugnung*).

In the case of Harris, his mental conflict has become more obviously physical. He is in a crouching position, hiding his face, hears his 'terrible, high moan' (p. 76), feels his thud, his chattering and observes his sudden agitated movement and prolonged crying.

### Marxist Literary Criticism

Marxist literary theory interprets a text as an ideological representation of the real world. Marxist theorists are interested in a literary work's socio-economic context, and, specifically the position it, and its author, adopts towards the issue of social class. Either a narrative will confirm the status quo of have and have nots, or it will seek to change in some way to the sociopolitical order. As such, the fates of the different characters can be examined in terms of an impact upon the socio-economic order that the narrative depicts.

A major question to consider when applying **Marxist theory** to a textual analysis, is where do the author's sympathies seem to lie? Does Hill support the status quo and dominant social mores, or sympathise with overturning them? The narrative certainly places the blame for the costly battles on the upper-class generals and politicians who have left the soldiers ill-prepared for trench warfare. The inclusion in the text of stiffly worded memoranda issued by operational High Command illustrates the detached and unfeeling attitude towards the soldiers' hardships by those who draw up the rules, a blatant example being the refusal to consider the base at Feuvry unfit for billeting after nine men have been killed in the shelling of it. Garrett, a middle-class lawyer by profession, doesn't bother to mask his 'contempt for the men who looked at maps and moved pins about upon them' (p. 97), while Barton writes in his final letter with passion and eloquence about 'the astonishing bravery of many men and... their tolerance of pain and terrible conditions' (p. 137). The narrative voice is unequivocally one of reason, and sympathy towards the soldiers' plight. In addition, in the figure of Coulter the narrative presents a character largely in thrall to the ideology of the ruling class, which Marxism holds is a means of blinding the masses to their own interests. Hill's patriotism is unwavering and often violently expressed, and despite Barton's liking for him, his observation about Coulter's 'passionate belief in the rightness of our cause and the German nation' and his being 'A man to whom the hearts of all generals, politicians and statesmen are turned' (p. 137) is a dupe to the interests of empire and capitalism.

Conversely, Hill's character is used to attack the unquestioning acceptance of authority that he experiences when recuperating in Britain, such as a general certainty about the war and the inevitable British triumph. The attitudes on the home front repeat to him what his parents give where 'nobody knew' (p. 5) the reality of the conflict, but leading to bitter arguments with his father; while his sister's assistance to his mother for injured soldiers on leave alienates Hilliard further from both women.

However, there are key questions that a Marxist theorist would ask of any texts that Hill does not address, and all of these focus on whose interests were served by the war, and the owners of the means of production that drove the war, such as the steel and

**Context**  
**Marx's theory**  
*The Communist Manifesto* was published in 1848, with the aim of explaining the engine of history as the struggle between the bourgeoisie (the ruling class) and the proletariat (the working class). The theory of Marxism was developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, and it is based on the idea that the means of production and the distribution of goods are controlled by a few people, while the majority of people are forced to work for them. This leads to class conflict, and eventually to a revolution where the proletariat takes control of the means of production and establishes a communist society.

**Marxist theory**  
 Marxist theory is a socio-economic theory that was developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. It is based on the idea that the means of production and the distribution of goods are controlled by a few people, while the majority of people are forced to work for them. This leads to class conflict, and eventually to a revolution where the proletariat takes control of the means of production and establishes a communist society.

**COPYRIGHT  
 PROTECTED**



Who among the politicians and financiers profited from its outcome? An entire industry was developed in Britain in order to support the war effort, but did this actually profit the poor? Clearly, addressing these very important matters would have required an encyclopaedic novel. However, Marxist theorists would probably look for some great



### **Debate Prompt**

1. In groups, discuss the way in which women are depicted in the novel. What attitude to the contribution of women on the home front during wartime does the novel suggest?



### **Active Learning task**

1. In groups, use the Internet to learn of the most common or most significant symptoms of shell shock. Create a two-column table with one column and examples of these symptoms where applicable in the novel.



### **Extended Question**

1. Evaluate how effectively Hill presents the psychological impact of the war. In your answer, focus on the way in which the author has shaped meanings.

INSPECTION COPY

INSPECTION COPY

**COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED**



## Glossary of Terms

<b>adnomination</b>	repeating a word, but in a different form. When a cognate is used.
<b>anaphora</b>	a rhetorical device involving the repetition of a word or phrase in sentences or clauses.
<b>antithesis</b>	the juxtaposition of two sentences that contrast in meaning with each other.
<b>attrition</b>	the persistent wearing down and weakening of something or someone, or, in a military context, by sustained and strategic attack.
<b>backstory</b>	events preceding those being related in the narrative present, providing meaningful detail to the narrative.
<b>conchy</b>	slang for 'conscientious objector', a person of fighting age who is legally obliged to carry out labour instead.
<b>Electra complex</b>	theory formulated by Carl Jung to complement Freud's Oedipus complex, describing a young girl's sexual desire for her father, and her view of her mother as an obstacle.
<b>enumeration</b>	as a literary device, enumeration is the step-by-step listing of items to create a cumulative effect.
<b>epistrophe</b>	using the same word or phrase at the end of a series of lines, or paragraphs.
<b>extradiegetic narrator</b>	a narrator who tells the story as they observe it, without actively participating in the events.
<b>foreshadowing</b>	an author's inclusion of hints which may suggest what will subsequently occur.
<b>Freudian dream analysis</b>	Freud's theory that a person's repressed desires are stored in the unconscious and find an outlet in dreams. This process protects the conscious mind from disruptive thoughts or urges.
<b>homoioteleuton</b>	parallel or adjacent words chosen with similar endings.
<b>id, ego, superego</b>	Freud's three stages of personality development, denoting gross, conscious and superconscious respectively.
<b>juxtaposition (lit.)</b>	a rhetorical device involving the placement of two literary elements side-by-side generally to illustrate a contrast between them.
<b>Linear narrative</b>	a narrative in which events are told in chronological order.
<b>Marxist theory</b>	the political and economic philosophy originated by Karl Marx. Marxist philosophy centres on the idea of class struggle, whereby society is divided into classes designated by class and ownership of the means of production. The goal is a society free of class distinction and its related inequality.
<b>metaphor</b>	a figure of speech in which one thing is stated to be another in order to create an association or similarity of meaning between the two.
<b>metonymy</b>	a figure of speech or metaphor where one word/idea is used to represent another that is closely associated.
<b>motif</b>	a recurring literary element (e.g. image, object, word/phrase, symbol) which underlines a theme and helps to create narrative cohesion.
<b>Oedipus complex</b>	Freud's term for the necessary stage in the psychosexual development of a male child subconsciously wishes to sleep with his mother and view his father as a rival for her affections.
<b>pathetic fallacy</b>	a particular type of personification in which human feelings are attributed to human, such as nature or inanimate objects.

INSPECTION COPY

**COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED**



<b>personification</b>	literary device that attributes living or human characteristics to figurative or non-literal sense.
<b>Platonic love</b>	a spiritual, non-romantic form of love between two people, coined by the Ancient Greek philosopher Plato.
<b>projection</b>	in Freudian psychology, a symbolic process during which a person projects their own emotions to another person, identifying their own unacceptable feelings as those of the other.
<b>repression</b>	Freudian concept for when a thought, memory or feeling becomes so distressing that the mind forces them to push it out of consciousness so that they forget about it.
<b>rhetoric</b>	in common usage, language intended to persuade someone of something; in literature, it comes across as hollow or insincere, or it is over-the-top and exaggerated. It is the art and eloquent use of speech or writing for the purpose of persuasion.
<b>semantic field</b>	a set of words linked to a specific subject or concept (e.g. verbs of movement).
<b>simile</b>	a figure of speech in which one thing is compared to another in order to highlight a similarity or similarity of meaning between the two.
<b>symbolism</b>	in literature, the use of a literary element that combines an image with a symbol that has a literal meaning in itself, but can also have a larger, more complex meaning.
<b>the collective unconscious</b>	a concept defined by Carl Jung denoting the part of the deep unconscious shared by all people, formed by an individual's personal experience, but is genetically inherited. A key example would be the instinct to live and avoid death.
<b>the implied author</b>	the impression of an ideological or philosophical viewpoint created by the author's choice of language and structure.
<b>time shift / flashback</b>	disruption of the chronological sequence of a narrative with the insertion of events that occurred at an earlier time.

INSPECTION COPY



INSPECTION COPY

**COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED**



## Bibliography

### Works Cited

Reed, Mary Jane, 'Recommended: Susan Hill', *The English Journal*, 72.4 (1983), pp. 307-310.

Ireland, K R, 'Rite at the Center: Narrative Duplication in Susan Hill's 'In the Spring'  
*Narrative Technique*, 13:3 (1983) pp. 172-180.

Brosman, Catharine Savage, 'The Functions of War Literature', *South Central Review*, 10:1 (1993) pp. 1-12.

### Web Articles Cited

Woledge, Elizabeth, 'Ambiguous sexuality, women writers and appropriative fiction: *Strange Meeting*' <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0958923042000287858>

Anon., 'Kirkus Review', *Saturday Review Press* <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/strange-meeting/> retrieved 21.11.19

### Further Reading

Cole, Sarah, 'Modernism, Male Intimacy, and the Great War', *ELH* 68:2 (2001) pp. 207-230.

Janik, Vicki and Del Ivan Janik (eds.), 'Susan Elizabeth Hill', in *Modern British Women Writers* (United States: Greenwood Press, 2002), pp. 136-141.

Das, Santanu (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to The Poetry of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

Bostridge, Mark, and Alan Bishop (eds.), *Letters from A Lost Generation* (London: Faber and Faber, 2013).

### Websites

[www.susanhill.org.uk](http://www.susanhill.org.uk) retrieved 8.11.19

Susan Hill's official website. Features news, information about the author's work and a collection of poems by Hill on her life.

[www.firstworldwar.com](http://www.firstworldwar.com) retrieved 8.11.19

This site provides a wealth of information about the Great War, including information on military and daily routines, and just about everything else.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/> retrieved 12.11.19

An excellent resource that compactly discusses all the key details of the war. Features various multimedia galleries that bring the war into vivid detail.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/nov/21/great-world-war-changing-the-world>

An article that gives an overview about how British life was affected by the war.

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/first-world-war-shell-shock> retrieved 12.11.19

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED



# Answers

## Part One

### pp. 2–28

#### Debate Prompts

1. Yes. Hilliard seems unfocused on account of his insomnia, and the sudden flashback of his mind wandering.
2. He seems to have been a rather lonely and perhaps oversensitive child. He has no real friends and has perhaps just imagined that the other boy feels smug and superior towards him because of his opinion of himself.
3. She is described as 'tightly corseted, upright' (p. 21) which complements her conservative character. The fact she wears a high-necked lace dress recalls Victorian modesty, and 'the lawn' (p. 21) implies that she is wealthy and concerned with keeping up appearances with austerity.
4. The Major is emblematic of the lack of understanding about the war that Hilliard is experiencing. He has an outdated view of warfare; for example, in his emphasis on the importance of the

#### Active Learning Task

1. Hill emphasises that Hilliard does not know how to blend in naturally, or even pass off as a soldier. He arrives too early for his train, he buys items that he does not need and cannot use, and he has 'nothing to do' (p. 25) after spending time in the Army and Navy store. Hill repeats the point with the observation, 'There was nothing that he could think of to do' (p. 26), which emphasises his apathy and inability to relate to those around him. He cannot even think about his future, and his mind seems to be like a blank slate, and this is a symptom of his traumatised condition.

2. Students should firstly note down Hilliard's specific views concerning the attitudes of British society at home (e.g. Constance and her friends, his father, the Major). For Internet use, a good resource on affected British society and its attitudes is

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/nov/11/first-world-war-changing-british-society>

One of the best general resources for WW1 is:

[www.firstworldwar.com](http://www.firstworldwar.com) retrieved 8.11.19

This site provides a wealth of information about the Great War, including information on military routines, and just about everything else.

### pp. 28–64

#### Debate Prompts

1. Hilliard's joke, 'Where's the war, Coulter?' (p. 30) reflects the need for humour as a coping mechanism. Hilliard's remark about the battle having been 'won' (p. 30) is ironic, aimed at those who believe that the war is being won easily.
2. This suggests the impact of the war on the home front, as pewter in an alloy with other armaments and other army provisions.
3. As a contrast, this does convey the cruelly unexpected nature of the war's horror, with its impact on ordinary people. It implicitly criticises the war by showing how easily ordinary people can be affected by their own actions.
4. It is a factual objective description that could form the basis for a report or an investigation.

#### Extended Essay Question

1. This is a large part of their relationship, as Barton's openness inspires the introverted Hilliard to interact with people and the world differently. However, students should focus on the nature of such an intense relationship. A key quote to this effect belongs to Hilliard during a discussion of their feelings, when he refutes David's suggestion that the two of them are basically alike: 'We're not. And it's a good thing. It's just that we happen to have had the same resp

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED



## Part Two

### pp. 65–85

#### Debate Prompts

1. The soldiers' unruliness ('the verses became more obscene and libellous' [p. 69]) and uneven' [p. 69]) hint at a type of moral destitution that mirrors the physical destitution of Feuvry. The town is 'almost derelict' (p. 69) just as the soldiers are almost derelict in their behaviour.
2. He is described as though he is reverting to an infantile state of vulnerability, in a face that is 'pale as death' and 'immobile' but making a continuous, agonised noise' (p. 75). Hill is trying to convey the horror at how war can reduce a man to the level of a severely disturbed child, barely able to function.
3. They are supposed to just get on with their service the best they can, there being no alternative. Getting drunk might have the limited benefit of allowing a soldier to forget the horrors of war.

#### Active Learning Task

1. In writing the paragraph, students should consider the slightly conflicted attitudes of Hilliard and Barton. Hilliard's intervention did save Harris from being caught up in the shelling, but seven other men were killed, and Hilliard himself was wounded. He should perhaps keep the death of one soldier in perspective. Hilliard will probably be seen as a pragmatist. Barton's thought that Harris may have suffered worsened his opinion of him. The fact that Hilliard lived to fight on in the war is also important to consider.

#### Extended Essay Question

1. The main point to the question is whether Hill's novel presents an individual's experience of war in a way that makes the one seem more favourable than the other. Students should consider Hilliard and Barton's characterisations, and how the former's pragmatism regarding war is a product of his experience and a coping mechanism. The less experienced Barton copes with his duties imperfectly, such as when he leads his men too close to the enemy position on his mission, leading to fatalities. Students should also consider the attitudes and values of the characters, such as Garrett, comparing those to the likes of his successor Keene and Captain Frazer.

### pp. 85–117

#### Debate Prompts

1. His initial excitement turns to fear, as he learns about the true nature of military combat, the shells and the atmosphere of the trench, as well as the dreadful injuries and loss of life. He is clearly rapt in shock at the 'shattered heap of limbs and helmets' (p. 101). The lesson to be taken from this episode is that war extends to a soldier's reaction to first experiencing the resulting carnage.
2. He questions the point of his mission 'To make a map!' (p. 103), which now seems in light of the strong obligation to honour the dead soldier Price by burying him instead of completing the mission. In the face of an unexpected rush of fatalism, he risks his own life pointlessly. He is prepared to die to avenge the apparent worthlessness of human life lost in the futility of war.

#### Active Learning Task

1. In writing their paragraphs, students should include some of the following points:
  - Tone – Barton's speech is a mix of bravado and despair, revealing his suicidal thoughts, and his 'unfeeling' remark about the dead around him. There is real desperation to Barton's speech: 'What has happened to me?' [p. 115]).
  - The contrast between the description of the shot private and other killed soldiers. Barton, who has feared death so closely, has imagined 'his eyes looking at me' (p. 114) and so his physical description makes it particularly haunting and traumatic for Barton.
  - Barton's sense of futility – He compares Price's death to that of Harris, calling it 'a waste'.

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED



## Part Three

### pp. 118–141

#### Debate Prompts

1. Yes. The comparison to ‘drones’ (p. 119) refers to the soldiers’ constant digging and taking up more time than fighting.
2. The ignorance about the war among his own family seems more acute now that Hilliard is in the war.
3. Garrett has no doubt brought up fully credible objections to the continued raids and they have been ignored. Given the disastrous consequences of the Big Push, the military command is responsible as a result.

#### Extended Essay Questions

1. Students should look at the use of memorials as ironic commentary on the inadequate letters as providing **backstory** that could impede the narrative flow if incorporated. The use of Barton’s letters to describe the disillusionment of the soldiers and the horrors of war should be discussed, and the effectiveness of using letters and other narrative elements should be evaluated.

### pp. 141–165

#### Debate Prompts

1. He is trying to be optimistic, looking on the bright side (‘Perhaps we really are in a spot worse here last summer. Perhaps it’ll work.’ [p. 143]).
2. It is a dream with pleasant childhood memories of a summer day’s swim transposed with his current experience, replacing his sister Beth. The reader may assume that Hilliard’s more pleasant memories of childhood upbringing have been revived through his relationship with Barton and by his survival.
3. It perhaps emphasises the sheer number of personnel involved in the fighting and the scale of the war.
4. Certain valid indicators include:
  - Hilliard being able to deal with mention of Barton during Garrett’s visit.
  - The full text of the Barton family’s invitation to visit.
  - Hilliard’s ability to enjoy viewing the countryside that Barton has described to him.
  - Hilliard’s feeling as though he is ‘following a map to a country he had always known.’
  - Use of **pathetic fallacy**, with Hilliard leaving the ‘vast, darkening’ (p. 165) sky behind him.

#### Extended Essay Question

1. The novel questions the entire meaning of ‘Home’, whether it is related to one’s upbringing or whether the idea is based upon some intangible emotional connection with a place. Hilliard’s contentment on visiting Barton’s home at the novel’s conclusion is based on both his experience and his sense of certainty regarding Barton’s judgement about the place. Students should focus on their understanding of ‘Home’ evolves in the novel, and how this is expressed about through his relationship with Barton.

INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED





# Whole-text Analysis

## Characterisation

### Debate Prompts

1. Barton's sensitivity to 'any kind of unfeelingness' (p. 136) is revealed in his dangerous reaction to the death of Price, both acts that saw him climb above the parapet and the reconnaissance raid, Barton ventures too near the enemy position and his group which again demonstrates his naivety and unfitness for war. However, he lifts the spirit of the experienced and principled CO Garrett recognises his good character. Barton reveals his conversation with Hilliard, who suggests at one point that Barton might 'register as a deserter'. Barton responds by saying 'I went through all that before I came out here. It would be a disgrace serving in the war is the right thing to do and also says that he is not afraid to die. The obligation to family and country and a heavy dose of bravado may have been compromised up for World War I.
2. Barton understands both the practical and technical failings of the war strategy, but the unstoppable force of nature does not discriminate among its victims. Barton has to live for a return to his home, but this has been denied him.
3. The ambiguity that exists regarding this point is important to evaluating Hilliard's character. Students may wish to analyse the text to determine whether, in their opinion, Constantine shows more compassion and sensitivity towards John than he appreciates.

### Active Learning Task

1. Students should seek textual evidence to support or refute whether Barton is sensitive or disillusioned by war. This can be compared to the sentiments expressed in Owen's poems 'The Sentry', 'The Show' and 'Dulce et Decorum Est'. In identifying a deliberate parallel, students may consider whether the sense of pity for the fallen that Owen tried to express is reflected in Barton's letters to his family, particularly the final one. The Poetry Foundation is a good starting point for researching the known facts about Owen. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/>)

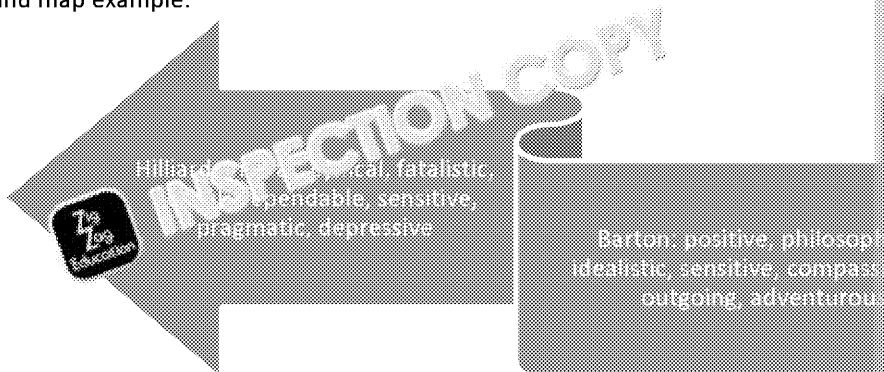
## Relationships

### Debate Prompts

1. The statement is based on the fact that most of the narrative is from Hilliard's viewpoint. Barton's, general outlook on life that needs to be improved.
2. Coming to terms with his own morbid self-attention possibly forces Hilliard to admit to his mother rather unfairly, as he does compliment her at the hospital. It is not clear whether they have changed from the earlier part of the narrative. However, his idealistic and positive feelings on visiting Barton's family suggest.

### Active Learning Task

1. Mind map example:



INSPECTION COPY

COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED



## Extended Essay Question

1. Friendship is an antidote to war to the extent that it stimulates the need for two people to experience the most predominant human emotion. Hill reveals how intense this feeling can become in the developing the central character relationship, and Hilliard's improved outlook on life is a result of the power of friendship. However, students also require to consider the pair's journey to the front where at least one of them will be killed. As they are taken closer to the front line, the end of the other is inevitable, because they are entirely at the mercy of external forces. Students should consider the idea of friendship being a real antidote to war survives the arc of the narrative.

## Genre

### Debate Prompts

1. War stories generally follow a set narrative pattern: one person (or perhaps a small group) of an anonymous number in order to tell his story. The novel is a process an individual tells the story of a small group of people, and can emotionally engage with their plight. Clearly, a major theme is the gain some insight into how soldiers felt about the most dangerous of situations.
2. Some examples:
  - The novel is a story of a man and the others try to coax the severely traumatised Hilliard back to the front at Barmelle Wood
  - Hilliard's experience visiting her son in hospital on his return

## Extended Essay Question

1. *Strange Meeting* captures life during wartime in France in the summer of 1914 in great detail, showing the relative comfort experienced by companies of soldiers based away from the front line and the conditions of the trenches. Students should also note the accuracy with which the novel depicts the horror of the shelling, the filth, the rats, the claustrophobia and the makeshift cooking, which is contrasted with the horrific deaths that occur. The novel also focuses on the most infamous characters of the war: the reckless offensives, the failures of planning, and the failure to grasp that the conflict will play a huge part in prolonging the war. Students should also use some of the Internet resources mentioned to gain more insight into combat conditions.

## Themes

### Debate Prompts

1. Memories function predominantly as a coping mechanism. Hilliard's memories of childhood provide a respite from his troubled time at home, while Barton's memories of family and other soldiers provide a respite from his growing perception of the sheer horror of the war. Hilliard's memories are primarily of his family with his comrades (Hilliard especially) in order to keep his family alive.
2. Although their friendship does not actively survive the war, Hilliard's visit to the front line is a reminder of his spirit. While Hilliard will inevitably be haunted by his experiences – and will suffer physically – the fact that the war is over will inevitably give him time and space to reflect on his experiences.

## Extended Essay Question

1. Students should emphasise that this novel is a war novel with a love theme. Without the war, the relationship would not have developed in this way: men did not share their emotions in peacetime, and intense fear for Barton's safety would not have been an objective basis in peacetime. And their time together at the front is a very precious time for both of them; however, the reason that their time is so precious is that they are completely isolated from the world by the war. The relationship is merely an interlude in the story of the war. Students should also note the way the relationship is merely an interlude in the story of the war. Students should also note the way the relationship is merely an interlude in the story of the war. Students should also note the way the relationship is merely an interlude in the story of the war.

**COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED**



## Attitudes and Values

### Debate Prompts

- Hill pays quite a bit of attention to Coulter's plight, which remains unverified by the shows of patriotism have seemed hubristic, and Barton makes the point in his final exposure or neglected wounds or simply of despair that he'd been left behind' (p. 133) that Coulter would have died more appropriately in character, 'rushing towards the with fixed bayonet' (p. 137). The message conveyed is that the heroic, devil-may-care promoted, despite his decency otherwise, is outmoded and unsustainable in practice.
- The narrative voice is generally detached and objective when not incorporating the However, this is a novel that invites renewed criticism of aspects of the First World military strategy voiced primarily by Garrett and Barton are a means of preserving the while portraying their political masters in a negative light.

### Active Learning Task

- The letter should be familiar or appropriate in tone (as it is early in the narrative) and reflect the fact that Percelle's primary, unlike Hilliard's, are interested in every detail of

## The Writer's Use of Language

### Debate Prompt

- This is entirely at the students' discretion.

### Active Learning Task

- The epilogue should cover Hilliard and the following characters from the regiment: way, some perspective on the failings of the campaign may be presented. The narrative objective, since the epilogue is a summary of events.

## Form

### Active Learning Task

- Example for one memorandum:

Memorandum	Narrative Function
<i>'The length of an average march under normal conditions for a large column is fifteen miles a day...'</i> (p. 66)	An example of ironic understatement by Hill, as the from Percelle, which is characterised by loud camaraderie men singing 'Captain Sparrow'. The dry regulation the narrator's observation almost immediately before there was not the natural camaraderie to be found

## Structure

### Active Learning Task

- The choice of events is at the students' discretion. Students should focus on key events informal entries, and associate these events with suitable moments in the plot. An example injury, which may be the climax of earlier events. For internet use, two of the best resources are [www.firstworldwar.com](http://www.firstworldwar.com) retrieved 8.11.19. This site provides a wealth of information about the Great War, including information on military routines, and just about everything else.

and

<http://www.zigzag.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/> retrieved 12.11.19

An excellent resource that compactly discusses all the key details of the war. Features various multimedia galleries that bring the war into vivid detail.

**COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED**



## Contextual Analysis

### Active Learning Task

- A rough online would include:
  - Commisérations and thanks to Barton’s family
  - Childhood
  - Wartime efforts and contact with family
  - Mention of Hilliard’s friendship
  - His life in the context of the war effort

## Literary Approaches

### Debate Prompt

- At the heart of this question is whether Hilliard’s perception of his mother and Beth is skewed or objective. Arguably the ‘injured author’ has nothing virtually invisible in the narrative otherwise. You might also discuss whether the among the soldiers is credible.

### Active Learning Task

- There are many invaluable first-hand accounts of the soldiers’ experiences and how they felt (including specific symptoms) at: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/voices-of> retrieved 12.12.19

A brief example for the table:

Symptom	Event
Moodiness, unsociability, alienation	Hilliard’s initial return to England after his first

### Extended Essay Question

- Key points to consider include:
  - Hill’s description of the effect of war on returning soldiers (e.g. Hilliard’s disorientation, the scent of the roses from his garden, which remind him of the dead)
  - How the ignorance of civilians about the nature of the war alienates the returning soldiers from wider society
  - How memories of the suffering of others traumatises the witness (e.g. Hilliard’s hospital; Barton’s guilt about Harris, Price and Coulter)
  - The horrific descriptions of war casualties
  - The fear of the unpredictability of front line engagement (e.g. Barton’s first misadventure, shelling starts)

INSPECTION COPY

**COPYRIGHT  
PROTECTED**

