Birdsong

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SEBASTIAN FAULKS

Sebastian Faulks was born in the market town of Newbury in Berkshire, England, to Peter Faulks and Pamela Lawless. Faulks' father was a highly decorated soldier and judge, and his uncle, Sir Neville Faulks, also served as a judge in the High Court. Faulks attended preparatory school in Newbury and studied English at Emmanuel College, Cambridge. After graduating, he worked for a short time as a teacher before becoming a journalist for *The Daily Telegraph* and its sister newspaper, *The Sunday Telegraph*. Faulks began writing fiction early in his career, and in 1984 he published his first novel, *A Trick of the Light*. In 1986, he became the literary editor of *The Independent*, an online newspaper, and continued to write, publishing *Birdsong* to critical acclaim in 1993. After the success of *Birdsong*, Faulks quit working as a journalist and turned to his fiction full-time, quickly becoming an important figure in contemporary British literature. By the end of 1993, Faulks was elected as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, a society founded by King George IV in 1820 to award literary merit and talent. In 2002, he was awarded Commander of the Excellent Order of the British Empire, the British order of chivalry, for his contribution to literature, earning him the honorific CBE. In keeping with the themes of war and history in *Birdsong*, Faulks sat on the Government Advisory Group for the Commemoration of the First World War from 2013 to 2018, where he advocated for public remembrance of the Great War. Faulks married his wife, Veronica Youlten, in 1989, and the couple went on to have three children together. Faulks and Youlten currently reside in London, England.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

World War I was a global war lasting from July 28, 1914 to November 11, 1918. The war divided the great powers of Europe into two conflicting entities; the Triple Entente of France, Russia, and Britain, and the Triple Alliance of Austria-Hungry, Italy, and Germany. The war, also known as the Great War, began brewing long before 1914, when political unrest in the countries of Bosnia and Serbia and Herzegovina threatened long-standing alliances within Europe. The instability reached a fever pitch on June 28, 1914 when Serbian Gavrilo Princip assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and his wife, Sophie, in Sarajevo, Serbia and Herzegovina. The war was fought on two fronts—the Western Front, in which Germany invaded France through the politically neutral country of Belgium; and the Eastern Front, in which Russia invaded the German-occupied regions of East Prussia and Poland. The Great War's death toll was staggering, and over nine million combatants and seven million civilians were killed as a direct result of the conflict. The war was known as "the war to end all wars," yet World War II would follow a mere twenty-one years later in 1939. World War I profoundly affected British society, and in a widespread display of patriotism, over 750,000 men volunteered for service during the first month. Women were also an integral part of the war, as it was their patriotic duty to turn over their husbands and sons to service and work the factory jobs they vacated. A shift occurred within the domestic and industrial spheres during the Great War, and while over one million Englishmen never returned home, over two million British soldiers returned home permanently disabled.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Birdsong is the second installment in Faulks' loosely related *France Trilogy*, including *The Girl at the Lion d'Or* and *Charlotte Gray*. All three novels take place in France and the United Kingdom, and each is chiefly concerned with the effects of war on society. *Birdsong* is a work of metahistory, much like Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, meaning it explores the uncovering and documentation of the past, paying close attention to the way historical trauma impacts future generations. Other popular works engaging the topic of World War I include Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth*, Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, and Rudyard Kipling's short story, "The Gardener." To this day, Faulks' *Birdsong* remains one of the United Kingdom's most beloved war novels, in part because it is considered a fairly accurate depiction of war—Faulks relied exclusively on the firsthand experiences of World War I veterans while researching his novel, including soldier interviews and journals, and other period-appropriate artifacts, such as newspapers. Faulks credits many authors with influencing his writing, including Charles Dickens, D. H. Lawrence, and T. S. Eliot; however, he credits Martin Middlebrook's 1971 historical text, *The First Day on the Somme* as the most influential. *The First Day on the Somme* examines the perspective of the British army in the days leading up to July 1, 1916—the first day of the Battle of Somme, the largest battle of World War I on the Western Front. As one of history's bloodiest battles, more than three million men participated in the Battle of Somme, and over one million were wounded or killed. Much like *Birdsong*, *The First Day on the Somme* aims to estimate the cost of war, and Middlebrook's account is often considered the definitive tally of British lives lost during the battle.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Birdsong*
- **When Written:** Early 1990s
- **Where Written:** London, England
- **When Published:** 1993
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Fiction, War
- **Setting:** France and England, 1910-1918 and 1978-1979
- **Climax:** Stephen Wraysford and Jack Firebrace are trapped deep under the French soil after a German bomb destroys their trench during World War I. Sadly, Jack dies of his injuries, but Stephen is rescued by enemy German soldiers, whom he immediately embraces after six longs days beneath the soil.
- **Antagonist:** René Azaire; war
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Enduring Popularity. Since its publication in 1993, *Birdsong* has become one of the most frequently borrowed books from British libraries, along with J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series and books from American crime writer, James Patterson.

"Bond, James Bond." In 2006, the estate of late British novelist Ian Fleming commissioned Faulks to pen a new James Bond novel. In 2008, Faulks and Fleming's estate published *Devil May Care* to both popular and critical acclaim. In the first four days of its release, the book sold nearly 45,000 copies in the United Kingdom alone.

PLOT SUMMARY

Birdsong opens in 1910 as Englishman Stephen Wrasyford arrives in the French city of Amiens to study textile manufacturing on behalf of his British employer. Stephen is tasked with observing the daily operations of factory owner René Azaire, and he boards in René's home with René wife, Madame Azaire, and their two children, Lisette and Grégoire. Stephen soon learns that the local textile dyers have begun to strike on account of poor wages and working conditions, and while René does not employ any dyers, his own workers are disgruntled over the prospect of new technology eliminating their jobs. René fears a widespread workers' strike, and he pays little attention to his life at home.

One day, Stephen finds Madame Azaire in the garden and learns that Lisette and Grégoire are not her children; the children's real mother died just two years before, and she is René's second wife. Stephen finds himself intrigued by René's wife, and after he discovers her delivering packages of food to the striking dyers and their hungry families, Stephen falls in love with her. Meanwhile, Madame Azaire, whose name is Isabelle, is likewise intrigued by Stephen. Suffocating in a loveless marriage with a husband who beats her, Isabelle is open to his obvious advances, and they soon enter into a heated affair. Stephen and Isabelle meet frequently in **the red room**, a forgotten bedroom in the servants' quarters of the Azaires' home, and their love grows until Isabelle finally agrees to run away with him. They live a quiet life in a small French town until Isabelle becomes pregnant. Ashamed and confused, she leaves Stephen, never telling him about the baby, and returns to her family home and her beloved sister, Jeanne.

Stephen is heartbroken; however, he doesn't look for Isabelle. He waits for a year in case she returns, and heads for Paris. He spends some time working as an assistant to a furniture maker, but his life is empty and meaningless. When World War I breaks out in 1914, Stephen is thankful for the distraction. He enlists in the army and his advanced education sees him through the ranks until he is soon a lieutenant fighting on the Western Front in France. The British trenches are filled with death and decay, and each day brings unspeakable horror, but Stephen finds comfort in his friendship with a fellow soldier named Michael Weir. Stephen is a world away from Isabelle and the red room, and he rarely thinks of her now. Each day is a struggle to survive, and as his men die all around him, Stephen is driven by his hate for his German enemy—and the men he commands. The war takes its toll on Stephen, and he nearly dies of an infection after he is injured in tunnel collapse; however, he is compelled to keep fighting. He believes that the war is nothing but "an exploration of how far men can be degraded," and there is no end to the depravity.

Stephen's story unfolds alongside that of his granddaughter, Elizabeth Benson, and her own life in London in the late 1970s. Elizabeth is single and fiercely independent. At thirty-eight, she is already the successful manager of a clothing design company, and she is also in love with a married man. Elizabeth is content in her life, despite its challenges, but she feels something is missing. One day, she reads a newspaper article about the anniversary of the 1918 armistice, and it touches a curiosity deep inside her. She knows her grandfather fought in the war, but little else about him. The topic seems too big and out of reach—it happened too long ago and in France—yet thoughts of it linger in her mind. She remembers seeing some of her grandfather's old journals in her mother's attic, and she decides to snoop a bit.

Elizabeth finds two journals, one of which is written in a strange code, and she gets very little information from them. Still, she senses that the war and her grandfather's place in it has some importance in her life—even if she doesn't know what that is. On her way to Brussels to visit her lover, Robert, Elizabeth stops at a World War I memorial in Albert, France. She finds a massive arch in an empty field engraved with British names. She learns that each name is a lost soldier—the unfound and presumed dead who had fallen on the surrounding fields.

Elizabeth is overwhelmed by the size of the arch and the death it represents. While she has vague knowledge about a few key battles, she never truly appreciated the scale of the war. "Nobody told me," she cries.

Back in 1917, the war rages on, and Stephen continues to fight. He finds himself back in Amiens after so much has changed. The city has previously been occupied by German soldiers and suffered subsequent bombardments, and Stephen barely recognizes the charred landscape. He soon discovers that Isabelle is still in town after a chance meeting with Jeanne, and he finds her disfigured and paralyzed. Isabelle further breaks his heart when she confesses her love for a Prussian soldier named Max. Stephen knows he must let her go, and he heads back to the front lines. The violence he finds there is unimaginable, and after an attack goes horribly wrong on account of bad planning, most of Stephen's platoon is cut down by enemy fire.

Physically exhausted and mentally broken, Stephen is comforted in his new friendship with Jeanne, but he finds it difficult to go on after Weir is killed by an enemy sniper. Stephen is deeply ashamed of the war and what they have done, and in the final days of fighting, he is trapped deep underground with a dying miner named Jack Firebrace after a German bomb blows their tunnel. Stephen resigns himself to death, and when he is certain humanity can get no darker, he is saved by enemy soldiers. The war has ended, and as the guns silence and the birds sing, the men embrace each other.

In London in 1978, Elizabeth enlists her friend Bob to help decode her grandfather's journals. She embarks on a journey to know her grandfather, and she begins with the men he served with. She locates his commanding officer alive and well in Scotland at eighty-eight years old, and he leads her to Brennan, a broken and forgotten soldier living in a veterans' home for over sixty years. Elizabeth finds herself pregnant with her lover's child, and while it seems that Robert will never leave his wife, she couldn't be happier. She loves Robert, but more than that, the child satisfies a deep emptiness that she had not even been aware of. When Bob finally cracks her grandfather's coded writing, Elizabeth finds unimaginable pain and suffering in the pages of the journals, but she also finds closure and hope. Through her journey to the past, Elizabeth learns the true story of her family and gains a new appreciation for the war and its cost to humanity. Elizabeth gives birth to a son she names John in honor of one of the men from her grandfather's journals, and she is ready to embrace her future—with a firm understanding of her past.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Stephen Wraysford – The protagonist of *Birdsong* and Elizabeth Benson's grandfather. Stephen is first introduced as young man in France in 1910. He is sent by his British employer to study textile manufacturing in the town of Amiens, where he boards with René Azaire. Stephen is an orphan; he has never met his father and his mother abandons him shortly after he is born, leaving him in the care of his grandfather. When Stephen's grandfather is sent to prison for a petty crime, he is sent to an institution. A social reformer becomes interested in him and encourages his education, but Stephen is never loved, and by the time he reaches Amiens, his life has little direction. Stephen quickly falls in love with Isabelle, René's wife, and they begin a steamy affair. Isabelle fills a void in Stephen's life that he has long since ignored, but after she leaves him, he is worse off than when he started. He initially finds distraction in World War I, but as the war drags on Stephen becomes filled with hate. He despises the German soldiers he fights against, and he even despises his own men. Stephen's sees the worst of himself reflected in the men he commands, and he watches as they commit unspeakable acts. Stephen finds solace in his friendship with Michael Weir, a fellow soldier, but when Weir is killed by an enemy sniper, Stephen finds it difficult to go on. His heart is further broken when Isabelle falls in love with a Prussian soldier, Max, and while he grows a great fondness for Isabelle's sister, Jeanne, Stephen never again feels the passion he experiences with Isabelle in Amiens. As the war rages on, Stephen begins to soften towards his men, and when he is trapped in a collapsed tunnel at the end of the war and saved by a German soldier, he embraces his enemy. Stephen records his story in an encrypted journal, and while his life is ultimately short and full of pain, his granddaughter, Elizabeth, is able to learn from him. Because of Stephen's story, Elizabeth gains a new understanding of her own modern life and a deep appreciation for the cost of war.

Elizabeth Benson – Stephen Wraysford's granddaughter and Françoise's daughter. Elizabeth personifies the modern English woman, and she is fiercely independent. At thirty-eight, she is already a successful clothing designer and lives a full and productive life; however, Elizabeth feels that something is missing. She is in a long-term relationship with Robert, a married European, and while it seems unlikely he will ever leave his wife, Elizabeth is as happy as she can be in their relationship. One day, she stumbles across a newspaper article about the anniversary of the 1918 armistice, and she becomes compelled to learn more about the war. She knows that her grandfather fought in the war but little else, and she senses that both the war and her grandfather have great importance in her life. Determined to learn more, she begins by visiting a memorial in Albert, France. Nothing can prepare Elizabeth for the sadness and loss she feels in the shadow of the monument and the countless British names, and for the first time, she understands the true cost of war. Elizabeth finds her grandfather's encrypted war journals in her mother's attic, and after enlisting the help of her friend, Bob, she is able to decode them. Her

grandfather's story and his trials during the war lends great insight into her own life, and when she gives birth to her own son, a representation of a future generation, she does so with a better understanding of the past.

Isabelle Azaire – René Azaire's wife and Stephen Wraysford's lover. Isabelle is born the youngest of five daughters, and it is always expected that she will remain at home and care for her indifferent and aging parents; however, Isabelle is independent and opinionated, and her father quickly arranges her marriage to René. Isabelle serves to underscore the oppression of women in a sexist society, as she has little control over her life and men decide her fate. René is a cruel husband, and when Stephen comes into her life, she is starved for attention. Her wildly sensuous affair with Stephen satisfies her sexual needs, but in the end she is unable to fully return his love. After she becomes pregnant, Isabelle is deeply ashamed of her choices and runs into the accepting arms of her sister, Jeanne. Isabelle gives birth to Stephen's child, Françoise, but she doesn't tell him. She is fiercely protective of her baby and doesn't want to further hurt Stephen. She ultimately falls in love with Max, a Prussian soldier, and her difficult decisions throughout the novel and multiple love affairs upend traditional stereotypes of women as demure and chaste. Isabelle is paralyzed and disfigured during an attack in Amiens during the war, and she later dies of the flu, never having told Stephen about Françoise.

Jack Firebrace – A British miner. Jack digs many of the tunnels beneath the trenches during World War I, and he works closely with Stephen Wraysford. Jack is kind and hard-working, and sadly, his work in the tunnels during the war is little different than his life as a miner laying underground railroads in London. He is a man of deep faith in God, and his love for his son, John, gives him solace during the war. Jack also finds strength in his friendship with fellow soldier Arthur Shaw, and the tenderness with which Faulks depicts their friendship serves to disrupt traditional stereotypes of masculinity. Jack is devastated when John dies of diphtheria and Shaw is killed in the tunnels, but he manages to survive on their memories. He dies deep under the French soil when a German bomb blows up the British tunnel in the final attack of the war.

René Azaire – Isabelle's husband and the father to Lisette and Grégoire. René runs the textile factory that Stephen Wraysford comes to France to observe, and he is a shrewd businessman and a cruel husband. He treats his textile employees badly, replaces their labor with new technology, and doesn't pay them a livable wage. René represents the patriarchy, and when he fails to get Isabelle pregnant, he feels that his place within society is compromised. René is emasculated by his inability to father more children, and he begins to beat Isabelle in lieu of a sexual release. René is condescending and controlling, and when Isabelle leaves him for Stephen, he is broken and humiliated. René is ultimately taken prisoner by the Germans during the war.

Jeanne – Isabelle Azaire's sister. Like Isabelle, Jeanne is expected to dedicate her life to her neglectful and indifferent parents, but she has other ideas. Instead, she dreams of making her own decisions and living for herself, and in this way, she challenges traditional gender stereotypes of women as dependent upon men. Jeanne and Isabelle are very close, and when a pregnant Isabelle leaves her lover, Stephen, Jeanne takes care of her sister. She again takes care of Isabelle after she is injured in the bombardments in Amiens during the war, and after Isabelle dies of the flu, Jeanne raises her daughter, Françoise, as her own. Jeanne is gentle and kind, and she befriends Stephen during the war when he needs it the most. She falls in love with him, and while they are married after the war, Stephen never feels the passion for her that he does for Isabelle.

Michael Weir – A British soldier and commanding officer of the miners. Weir and Stephen form a close friendship and rely on each other during the darkest days of war. Weir is a kind but scared man, and Stephen's superstitious card games give him something to believe in when life seems pointless. Weir is also a virgin when he arrives on the Front, and his fear of death and the sex challenges typical notions of masculinity. Despite his fear, Weir never falters during the war, and Stephen considers him the bravest man he knows. Sadly, Michael is shot and killed by an enemy sniper near the end of the war, and he is deeply mourned by Stephen.

Monsieur Bérard – René Azaire's friend and husband to Madame Bérard. Bérard is a self-important man who, like René, exemplifies the confines of the patriarchy. He either talks over or ignores all the women in his life and is convinced that he is of "superior breeding." Bérard is also a coward, and when the Germans occupy Amiens, he quickly offers up his home to the commandant. When the soldiers pull out of the city after only a few days, Bérard is left a disgrace.

Brennan – One of the artillery soldiers in Stephen Wraysford's unit during the war. Brennan's brother is killed in the war, and while he survives, Brennan is badly injured in the final battle and lives the rest of his life in a veterans' home. Stephen's granddaughter, Elizabeth, learns about Brennan from Captain Gray's wife, and she begins to visit him in the home.

Lieutenant Levi – A German soldier and children's doctor from Hamburg. Levi's brother is killed in the explosion set off by Stephen Wraysford when he is stuck in the collapsed tunnel with Jack Firebrace, and Levi personally rescues Stephen. Levi is a good man who feels obliged to defend his country, and he is deeply religious and guided by his faith. When he finally frees Stephen from the trenches, instead of treating him like his enemy, he embraces him like a brother.

John – The son of Jack Firebrace and Margaret Firebrace. John is of "frail mind and body," and he dies of diphtheria while Jack is away at war. In 1978, Elizabeth Benson names her own son

John to honor the promise her grandfather made to Jack; as Jack dies in the trenches, Stephen promises to have children on his behalf.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Arthur Shaw – A British miner and Jack Firebrace's closet companion in war. Shaw is killed when Germans blow up a section of the British trench.

Françoise – Elizabeth's mother, and the biological child of Stephen Wraysford and Isabelle Azaire. After Isabelle dies in the flu epidemic, Françoise is raised by Isabelle's sister, Jeanne.

Captain Gray – Stephen Wraysford's commanding officer during the war. Gray is Scottish, and he spends most of his time reading novels and books about psychiatry. He manages to survive the war and helps Stephen's granddaughter, Elizabeth, learn more about the war in 1978.

Bob – The husband of Irene, Elizabeth Benson's business partner. Bob has knowledge of language and archeology, and he cracks the secret code of Stephen's journals.

Irene – Elizabeth Benson's business partner and Bob's wife. Irene and Bob are an older couple who never had children. Irene is jealous when Elizabeth becomes pregnant.

Erich – Elizabeth Benson's business partner. Erich is an older man from Austria, and he is disappointed that Elizabeth is not interested in marrying his son.

Margaret Firebrace – Jack Firebrace's wife and John's mother. Margaret is an attentive wife who sends Jack letters and parcels of socks and food during the war.

Lisette – René Azaire's daughter and Isabelle Azaire's stepdaughter. As the story begins, Lisette is a teenager who inappropriately comes on to Stephen sexually. She grows into a woman and marries Lucien Lebrun, the dyer who instigates the dyers' strike.

Grégoire – René Azaire's son and Isabelle Azaire's stepson.

Madame Bérard – Bérard's wife. Madame Bérard spends most of her time admiring her husband.

Meyraux – René Azaire's senior man at the textile factory. Meyraux is an honest man, and he helps the workers and René agree on terms and avoid a strike.

Lucien Lebrun – One of the textile dyers in Amiens and the lead agitator in the dyers' strike. Lucien befriends Isabelle when she brings his family food during the strike, and false rumors circulate that they are having an affair. He later marries Lisette, René Azaire's daughter.

Mathilde Fourmentier – Isabelle and Jeanne's eldest sister. Mathilde is a sullen young woman who is given to fits of anger. She marries and moves from home.

Béatrice Fourmentier – Isabelle and Jeanne's elder sister. She forms a fierce alliance with her sister, Delphine, and she later marries and moves from home.

Delphine Fourmentier – Isabelle and Jeanne's elder sister. She is close with her sister, Beatrice. Delphine too marries and moves from home.

Jean Destournel – A young infantry officer who courts Isabelle before she marries René Azaire. Isabelle's father tells Jean he is "too undistinguished" to marry his daughter and ultimately scares him off.

Turner – A British miner. Turner is killed underground in an explosion during the war.

Bill Tyson – A British miner. Tyson shares a dugout with Jack Firebrace and Arthur Shaw. He is killed in a battle at Beaumont-Hamel.

Tipper – One of the infantrymen in Stephen Wraysford's unit. He goes mad early in the war and continues fighting. Tipper reflects the deep shellshock faced by many World War I soldiers.

Colonel Barclay – One of Stephen Wraysford's commanding officers.

Mark – Elizabeth Benson's old college friend and Lindsay's husband.

Lindsay – Elizabeth Benson's old college friend and Mark's wife. Lindsay is constantly trying to fix Elizabeth up with new men.

Stuart – One of the men Lindsay tries to fix Elizabeth up with. Stuart is kind and interested in Elizabeth. He is accomplished and cultured, and is considered a good catch; however, he is also overbearing and pretentious. Stuart asks Elizabeth to marry him and she declines.

Ellis – One of the infantrymen in Stephen Wraysford's unit. Ellis convinces Stephen to go to Amiens with him during the war. He is killed by enemy gunfire during an assault.

Douglas – One of the infantrymen in Stephen Wraysford's unit. Douglas is fatally injured in an explosion. Stephen holds him as he dies.

Max – A Prussian soldier with whom Isabelle Azarie falls in love during the German occupation of Amiens. He is a kind man who takes good care of Isabelle's child. Max is injured during the war and his leg is amputated. He dies shortly after the war.

Evans – A British miner.

Aunt Elise – Madame Bérard's mother.

Robert A married European man with whom Elizabeth has a relationship. Elizabeth is reasonably happy with him, though she knows that Robert is unlikely to leave his wife.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-

coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

HISTORY AND THE FUTURE

At its essence, Sabastian Faulks' *Birdsong* is a powerful reminder of the importance of the past on present and future generations. *Birdsong* chronicles the lives of Englishman Stephen Wraysford and his granddaughter, Elizabeth Benson, spanning two continents and nearly seventy years, and this unique structure allows Faulks to highlight the impact of historical trauma across generations. Stephen's experiences in the violent trenches of World War I deeply affect who he becomes, and while the war is full of intense pain and profound shame, it is an essential part of Elizabeth's identity as well. Elizabeth, however, knows very little about the war or the men who fought in it, including her grandfather, and this reflects society's tendency to ignore the lessons of the past. In fact, it is not until Elizabeth begins to learn about the war and her grandfather's place in it that she begins to better understand herself. Driven by a strange compulsion to uncover her history, Elizabeth finds that the war "touches an area of disquiet and curiosity" connected to her "own life and its choices." Through this depiction of Elizabeth and her efforts to discover her identity, Faulks argues that the past lives on in the present—and that it is in one's best interest to know his or her history.

Stephen's experiences in the war are horrific, and he goes to great lengths to conceal his involvement, which allows future generations to live oblivious to the past. During the war, Stephen is forced to participate in senseless killing, and the broken and decaying bodies of other soldiers litter the trenches and surrounding areas as far as the eye can see, until the smell of blood overwhelms his senses. To Stephen, the smell is "like the back of a butcher's shop, only stronger." In order to survive during the war, Stephen tries to ignore his pain and rarely verbalizes his experiences. When Stephen finally commits his feelings to a private journal, he encrypts his writing in "Greek letters, French language, and a bit of private code" so that it cannot be easily read. Encoded in his journal, Stephen writes, "No child or future generation will ever know what this [war] was like. They will never understand. When it is over we will go quietly among the living and we will not tell them." Stephen's efforts to hide his experiences reflects society's broader efforts to cover up or obscure painful history. After the war, Stephen refuses to speak. His silence lasts two whole years, and even after it is broken, he will not speak of the war. According to Elizabeth's grandmother, "from that day on it was as though [the war] hadn't happened." Françoise, Elizabeth's mother and Stephen's daughter, explains, "Like a lot of men of that generation, he never really recovered." Stephen spends the rest of his short life concealing his past, and he dies before Elizabeth is born. While the exact cause of Stephen's death is not known, it is clear that he intends to take his memories and experiences with him to the grave.

Of course, Elizabeth must in turn go to great lengths to uncover the past and learn the story of her grandfather; her unfamiliarity with history mirrors society's own ignorance of the past. Despite the significance of World War I on the British people, Elizabeth knows next to nothing about the war. When she questions an older Austrian friend who was a young boy during the war to find out what it was like, he answers, "I have no idea. I don't think about war. In any case your English schools should have taught you all about that." Elizabeth, the representation of mainstream society, knows only the vague surface details of the war, such as where it was fought and by whom, and has very little understanding of what actually happened. When Elizabeth travels from England to France to visit a memorial honoring the lost soldiers of the area, she is overwhelmed by the sheer size of the monument and the countless names that cover every inch of it. She is shocked to discover that the massive structure does not represent *all* of the dead, only those unfound and *presumed* dead. It also does not reflect the death toll of the entire war but only the surrounding battlefields. "Nobody told me," Elizabeth claims. "My God, nobody told me." Elizabeth is shaken that her own history involves this much death, yet it is not talked about. Once Elizabeth finds all of her grandfather's journals hidden in her mother's attic after weeks of searching, it takes her friend, Bob, an expert in language and archaeology, over two months to break Stephen's coded writing. The past does not reveal itself easily to Elizabeth, and when it does it is a source of considerable pain and shame; however, history lends important, if uncomfortable, insight into her modern life.

By excavating the past, Elizabeth learns that history truly does repeat itself. Her own choices in life mirror those of her biological grandmother, Isabelle, whom Elizabeth has never even met. Separated by decades, both women fall in love with forbidden men—Elizabeth with a married man, and Isabelle with a man who is not her husband—and both relationships result in a child. Of course, Isabelle gives birth to Elizabeth's mother, Françoise, and when Elizabeth gives birth to her own son, she reaches into the past to name him John, a "promise made by her grandfather." From her grandfather's journals, Elizabeth learns about Stephen's attempt to comfort a dying man at the end of the war. The soldier's own son, John, had since died of a childhood illness, and the soldier questions the point of war and all the death. After all, he is certain to die as well, and even if he doesn't, he is too old to have any more children. Stephen consoles him, stating, "then I will have [children] for you." Through the birth of John, Faulks implies that past generations are alive and well in the present, and they alone represent the hope for a better future.

LOVE AND HATE

From the passion of young lovers to the deadly animosity of war, *Birdsong* is an intimate look at the many forms of love and hate. The characters within Sebastian Faulks' novel are overwhelmingly driven by these two conflicting emotions, each in different ways and to very different ends, and Englishman Stephen Wraysford is one such example. As a young man before World War I, Stephen is motivated by his forbidden love for Isabelle Azaire, the wife of a French textile manufacturer he has been tasked to observe by his British employer. Later, entrenched in the gruesome violence of the Great War (World War I), Stephen's hate for his German enemy—and for the very troops he commands—compels him to stay alive and keep fighting through unimaginable odds. The men Stephen fights with and against are likewise motivated by their emotions; however, unlike Stephen, the troops are guided by love for their country, love for their families, and love for each other. While it is hate that keeps Stephen alive, he is ultimately saved by an act of love, through which Faulks effectively argues the power and triumph of love over hate.

Many of the characters in *Birdsong* are motivated by hate, through which Faulks highlights the power of this negative emotion on human behavior. When Isabelle runs away with Stephen, her decision to leave is in large part due to her dislike for her husband, not merely her love for Stephen. Isabelle's husband, René, is a cruel man, and when she fails to become pregnant on account of his own impotence, he begins to beat her. As Isabelle's disdain for René grows, so does her "passion" for Stephen, and this is evidence of the effects of hate on Isabelle's behavior. As Isabelle leaves René, she questions, "Why should I trust you when you have given me so little reason even to like you?" Isabelle admits that she requires very little in terms of love, and that she "could be happy in the simplest way," but René's poor treatment of her cements her decision to go with Stephen, even though she is not entirely trusting of his love, either. Later, as a captain in the British army during the Great War, Stephen is motivated not by love or comradery, but by a "pitiful contempt" for the men in his charge. He views the war as "an exploration of how far men can be degraded," and the actions of his troops satisfy his morbid curiosity, without which Stephen claims he would "walk into enemy lines and let himself be killed," or "blow his own head off with one of these grenades." Like Isabelle, Stephen's actions are in large part driven by his hate. Stephen is further fueled by hate when he is trapped deep underground with a dying Jack Firebrace after a German bomb destroys their trench. Stephen attempts to provoke Jack with negativity, yelling, "Jack, can you hear me? I want to tell you about the Germans and how much I hate them. I'm going to tell you why you've got to live." Stephen's hate sustains him in the destroyed tunnel; however, Jack dies unmoved by his contempt.

Of course, Stephen's hate cannot continue to sustain him either, and after he is rescued by German soldiers after six days trapped under the French soil, both Stephen and his enemy surrender in a spontaneous act of love—a crucial turning point in Stephen's character. As Stephen is saved by Levi, a German officer whose own brother was killed in the very same mine collapse, Faulks writes, "Levi looked at this wild-eyed figure, half-demented, his brother's killer. For no reason he could tell, he found that he had opened his own arms in turn, and the two men fell upon each other's shoulders, weeping at the bitter strangeness of their human lives." Until the moment they meet, Stephen and Levi are prepared to continue fighting and kill the enemy should he be found on the other side of the dirt. Face to face, however, both men react differently. Exhausted and mutually defeated after years of war and violence, the men are unable to continue their blind hate and instead embrace each other, through which Faulks argues the definitive power of love over even the strongest of hate.

Love is the driving force behind the plot and many of the characters within *Birdsong*, and in this way Faulks highlights the power of love in shaping and influencing human behavior. When Isabelle and her sister, Jeanne, are first introduced as young girls in the French city of Rouen, the narrator remarks that Isabelle "loved Jeanne as she loved no one else." Jeanne returns this intense love and devotes most of her life to taking care of her sister. Jeanne even raises Isabelle's daughter, Françoise, as her own after Isabelle dies of the flu. Many of Jeanne's actions are in direct response to her love for Isabelle, highlighting the motivating nature of love. Furthermore, because of Isabelle, Stephen quits his job in London and delays his return to England, deciding instead to live in St.-Rémy-de-Provence, a commune in Southern France near Isabelle's family, so that he and Isabelle can be together. Like Jeanne, Stephen's own actions are driven by his love for Isabelle, again reflecting the powerful and positive influence of love on human behavior. Lastly, in the trenches of World War I, British miner and trench digger Jack Firebrace finds solace in love during the darkest days of war. Jack's love for his son, John, gives him the strength to keep digging day and night, and after John dies from diphtheria, Jack turns to the love he feels for fellow miner, Arthur Shaw. In Firebrace's "strange alternate life" of the war, Shaw is "the only person in the world to him," and they both rely on their love for each other to endure the hardships of war, further supporting Faulks' argument of the influence of love. Through the representation of love and hate within *Birdsong*, Faulks implies that even the violence of war is no match for the enduring power of love.

SEX AND GENDER

With the passionate affair between Englishman Stephen Wraysford and the married Isabelle Azaire, sex is prominently displayed—and explicitly

described—within Sabastian Faulks' *Birdsong*. When Stephen goes abroad to France to study textile manufacturing, he falls in love with the wife of his preceptor. Isabelle, neglected in her arranged marriage and stifled by a patriarchal society, eagerly enters into the affair. Her own marriage is completely lacking in sexual satisfaction, and her husband, René, approaches her in "a businesslike and predatory manner," which she receives with "submissive indifference." Isabelle is empowered by the carnal nature of her relationship with Stephen, and in a strange paradox, she finds strength in the very thing that oppresses her. Sex also plays an important role during Stephen's experiences in World War I; from the prostitutes who serve the frontline soldiers to the intimacy of the men who share a foxhole, Faulks dismantles traditional stereotypes regarding sex and gender, challenging popular assumptions of what it means to be a man or a woman.

Faulks' initial description of sex and gender early in the novel reflects popular stereotypes, which makes the effect of dismantling them later in the text all the more powerful. When Isabelle is introduced as a young girl in Rouen, she is described as the youngest of three daughters, and it is "assumed that when the other girls leave home Isabelle will stay and look after her parents." As a woman, Isabelle has little control over the course of her life. Isabelle's father, "a man bored by his houseful of women," forces her to marry René Azaire as punishment for falling in love with a young man of lesser social status whom he does not approve of. Isabelle's father asserts his patriarchal power to ensure that she does not marry beneath her class—and in the process, he breaks her heart. Isabelle's marriage to René proves miserable, and when his own unhappiness manifests in impotence, he begins to beat Isabelle in lieu of a sexual release. René's inability to perform sexually is emasculating, and because of his impotence, "he subsequently experiences a kind of emotional powerlessness towards [Isabelle]." René's abuse is his attempt to tip the scales in his favor, and this reflects the sexist nature of society.

Beginning with Stephen and Isabelle's affair, Faulks begins to upend common stereotypes regarding sex and gender by depicting Isabelle as a sensual woman with a voracious sexual appetite. When Isabelle and Stephen's love is finally realized, they begin their affair in "**the red room**," a deserted bedroom in the staff quarters of the Azaires' home that has been long forgotten by René. Isabelle decorates the room a crimson color symbolic of her and Stephen's racy affair, and they escape to the room as often as possible. In the isolation of "the red room," Stephen tears the clothes from Isabelle's body and does things to her that her older sister never told her about. Isabelle refuses to feel guilty for indulging her desires, despite acknowledging that the act is "surely not the way of the Catholic church." Isabelle is expected by society and her religion to be chaste and pure, and this runs counter to her actual desires and actions. Ultimately, despite her initial love for him, Isabelle leaves Stephen and returns to her abusive husband. While she challenges society's expectations with her affair, she eventually succumbs to the pressure and returns to her violent and loveless marriage. However, when the Germans occupy France during World War I and René is led away with the other men, Isabelle quickly falls in love with a German soldier. Again, Faulks challenges popular gender stereotypes by representing Isabelle as a woman with multiple love affairs. Instead of a demure woman, she is depicted as sexual and desirous.

Birdsong also challenges sex and gender stereotypes of men. Faulks depicts several of the men in his novel with tenderness and vulnerability, lending a certain femininity to their description. In the trenches of World War I, Englishman Jack Firebrace reflects on the importance of comradery, and he describes his closest wartime friend, Arthur Shaw, as "handsome" with "level eyes" and a "muscular back." Faulks writes, "Jack could almost feel the supple shape of Shaw's body as it curved to accommodate him in the narrow, stinking dugouts where they slept." The intimate and vaguely sexual description of the two men challenges popular assumptions about men and masculinity, especially of soldiers. Faulks describes Stephen's closest wartime comrade, Michael Weir, as a virgin who never finds the courage to seduce a woman. Stephen dedicates most of his off time to finding Michael a prostitute, and at the door of a brothel, Michael cries, "Christ, Wraysford, just let me get out of here. Let me go home. I don't want this." Weir's inexperience and fear of the opposite sex (and perhaps his fear of sex itself) strips him of his expected virility, and because of this, he appears less masculine. Neither Jack, Shaw, nor Weir are described in traditional terms of sex or gender, and because of this paradox, Faulks' attempt to dismantle popular stereotypes is much more effective. Images of women have long since been manipulated in literature to make them appear more masculine; however, the addition of men described in nearly womanlike terms is much rarer—as even metaphorical implications of femininity can be viewed as a threat to patriarchal society. Faulks' representation of the men in *Birdsong* is unexpected and powerful, and as such, it serves to better disrupt stereotypes involving sex and gender.

NATURE, WAR, AND MORALITY

Sebastian Faulks' *Birdsong* is infused with signs of nature and elements of the natural world. **Birds**, a symbol of optimism in the darkness of war, are heard singing over battlefields, and Jack Firebrace and the other English miners use small yellow canaries to test deadly gas levels deep beneath the soil of the World War I trenches. The serene and pastoral setting of the French battlefield is a cruel reminder of nature's disregard for war and the cruelty of men, and when Faulks juxtaposes the natural world against the human nature—and by extension, the morality—of the men

fighting the war, he comes to a disheartening conclusion. As British officer Stephen Wraysford discovers, there are "no boundaries the men will not cross, and no limits to what they will endure." Much like the natural world, the soldiers carry on through the war despite its depravity, and often in complete disregard to the cruelty of men. In this way, Faulks highlights the greatest tragedy of war—the potential ugliness of human nature and the loss of one's innocence and morality.

Throughout much of *Birdsong*, nature is compared, often beautifully, to the offensiveness of battle, and this implies nature's indifference to the actions of men and war. When Jack and his company must march a considerable distance to their billet to rest, they can barely manage the walk. Their aching bodies scream under the stress of their heavy packs, and Jack twice falls asleep. Against the backdrop of the blackened and scorched landscape, Jack realizes that some green grass still remains "that had not been uprooted," and there are "blossoms in the trees." The grass and the flowers continue to grow in the face of his suffering. As a career miner, Jack is comfortable underground; however, he has a difficult time in the trenches. He "tries not to imagine the weight of earth on top of them," and he refuses to "think of the roots of trees, stretching down through the soil." Jack realizes they are "too deep now," and Faulks' imagery of tree roots stretching down to a distant Jack represents how far he has fallen from righteousness. Since Faulks suggests that nature cares very little about the actions of the men, the roots' inability to even reach Jack carries increased significance.

Faulks also highlights human nature, and in the soldiers' continued degradation, he argues the impact of war on morality. As the war rages on, Jack notes that "none of these men would admit that what they saw and what they did was beyond the boundaries of human behavior." Instead, they do what is expected of them, "and Jack too joins the unspoken conspiracy that all is well, that no natural order had been violated." Of course, this isn't true; however, the irony of the statement makes this clear. As Stephen and Weir assess their bleak surroundings in the trenches, Stephen says, "I believe that far worse things than we have seen will be authorized and will be carried out by millions of boys and men like my Tipper and your Firebrace. There is no depth to which they can't be driven." Stephen has little faith in the morality of men, and his opinion is repeatedly reinforced, further reflecting the impact of war on humankind's moral compass. After half of Stephen's platoon dies in the advancing German infantry, he grows "used to the sight and smell of torn human flesh" as he watches "men harden to the mechanical slaughter." To Stephen, there seems "a great breach of nature which no one has the power to stop." The events of the war are so unspeakable, they appear unnatural, and as argued by Faulks, this too reflects the limitless boundaries of human nature. As the war nears its end, Stephen discloses in a letter to Isabelle, his lover before the war, that "some crime against nature is about to be committed. I feel it in my veins. These men and boys are grocers and clerks, gardeners and fathers—fathers of small children. A country cannot bear to lose them." In the killing of innocent men, the war is more than a crime against humanity, it is the absolute worst example of human behavior.

Ironically, while on a furlough to England after being nearly killed by the German infantry, Stephen manages to find some healing and solace in the peaceful nature of the English countryside. He is aware of the sky, the moon, the trees, and the church tower in the distance, and instead of being separate from them, Stephen feels as if they are "part of one creation, and he too [...] is one with them." Stephen considers his actions in the war a crime against nature; yet, metaphorically speaking, he is cleansed by nature. Stephen's experience in the English countryside serves to inspire optimism going into the final push of the war, and this optimism remains until the end of the novel. When Stephen's great-grandson is born decades after the war, his birth in itself symbolic of hope and possibility, there is one final birdsong. A crow flies off, "erupting from the branches with an explosive bang of its wings, rising toward the sky, its harsh, ambiguous call coming back in long, grating waves toward the earth, to be heard by those still living." While the presence of birdsong symbolizes optimism, Faulks' use of a crow carries negative connotations of death and bad luck. Thus, the birdsong of the crow reflects a kind of guarded optimism—one that is ever mindful of the violent capabilities of humankind.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

BIRDS

Birds are repeatedly referenced within Sebastian Faulks' *Birdsong*. They often represent optimism and hope for the future, and also offer a reminder of the indifference of nature to the violence and inhumanity of war. In the darkest days of battle, birds can be heard singing over the trenches, and as the men engage in endless killing, the birdsongs represent life carrying on in the face of mankind's destruction. Protagonist Stephen Wraysford has a deep fear of birds and is plagued most of his life by a reoccurring dream in which a roomful of birds threaten to peck his face. As an orphan, and later a heartbroken man embittered by war, Stephen resents and fears the life and optimism that birds symbolize. It isn't until Stephen stops hating and begins to love that his fear of birds begins to subside. Years later, Elizabeth, Stephen's granddaughter, gives birth to a son she names John—a manifestation of Stephen's promise to fellow dying solider Jack, whose own son named John had recently died, to

have children on his behalf; as she does so, a crow flies across the sky. Crows, often a symbolic of bad luck and death, here represent a sort of guarded optimism within the story. The war is proof of the wickedness of men, and without proper knowledge of the past, society has the potential to repeat the very same horrors.

THE RED ROOM

The red room is a forgotten bedroom in the servants' quarters of René and Isabelle Azaire's home, and it is symbolic of the forbidden love between Isabelle and protagonist Stephen Wraysford. The room, named for the crimson cover that decorates the bed, is where Stephen and Isabelle realize their love, and it is where they make plans to run away together. In the Azaires' massive home, Stephen is constantly getting turned around and lost on the way to dinner, but he never forgets where the red room is. Ironically, after Isabelle and Stephen admit their affair and run away, René turns the house upside down looking for evidence of their love but forgets all about the red room. In a way, Stephen and Isabelle's love is protected by the room. Of course, their love doesn't last and Isabelle leaves Stephen heartbroken, but neither of them ever forget their passionate afternoons in the room. Years later, after the war nearly kills them all, the Azaires' home takes heavy shellfire. Isabelle is disfigured and paralyzed in the attack, and the red room, much like Stephen and Isabelle's love, is destroyed beyond repair.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Birdsong* published in 1993.

Part One: France 1910 Quotes

"This morning I was out doing some errands in the town. There was a window open in a house near the cathedral and someone was playing the piano."

Madame Azaire's voice was cool and low [...].

Monsieur and Madame Bérard looked startled. It was evidently not the kind of thing they had expected. Azaire spoke with the soothing voice of one use to such fancies. "And what was the tune, my dear?"

"I don't know. I had never heard it before. It was just a tune like Beethoven or Chopin."

"I doubt it was Beethoven if you failed to recognize it, Madame," said Bérard

gallantly. "It was one of those folksongs, I'll bet you anything."

Related Characters: Monsieur Bérard, René Azaire, Isabelle Azaire (speaker), Stephen Wraysford, Madame Bérard

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs at the very beginning of the novel, during protagonist Stephen Wraysford's first dinner in the Azaire's home. This is also Stephen's first real interaction with the Azaire's, and it is very telling of Isabelle's oppressed existence as René's wife. Isabelle is trapped within the confines of a sexist society, and when she attempts to make a meaningful contribution to their dinner conversation, she is met with condescension and insult. Monsieur and Madame Bérard look "startled" because they don't believe that Isabelle knows the first thing about classical music, or anything else for that matter. As a representation of the patriarchy, Bérard believes in his own self-importance, and his wife serves only to reassure him. If he says the song Isabelle heard isn't Beethoven, then it most certainly cannot be. René shares Bérard's false assumptions about Isabelle's ignorance based on her gender, and his patronizing tone is clear proof of this.

The way Bérard and René treat Isabelle is a reflection of how women are treated in society as a whole throughout the novel, and it is the source of Isabelle's unhappiness for most of her life. From the moment Isabelle is born she is told what to do by her first her father and then her husband, and her life is never truly her own. The constant abuse and deep unhappiness that Isabelle feels underscores the painful result of misogyny within society, and it also serves to make the freedoms that Elizabeth enjoys in 1978 all the more significant.

"Madame," said Azaire, "I assure you that Isabelle has no fever. She is a woman of a nervous temperament. She suffers from headaches and various minor maladies. It signifies nothing. Believe me, I know her very well and I have learned how to live with her little ways." He gave a glace of complicity toward Bérard who chuckled. "You yourself are fortunate in having a robust constitution."

Related Characters: René Azaire (speaker), Isabelle Azaire, Monsieur Bérard, Madame Bérard

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs right after Isabelle excuses herself from the dinner table with a headache, and in a rare display of solidarity, Madame Bérard expresses polite concern. Of course, Isabelle doesn't really have a headache—she simply wants to get away from René and Bérard's sexist abuse. Not only does René minimize Madame Bérard's concerns, in itself a show of his misogyny, but he insults Isabelle and minimizes her health and wellbeing. This quote relies on the popular tropes of women as "nervous" and delicate creatures who continually suffer, as if their gender is some type of disorder. René, not Isabelle, is the authority on Isabelle's health and wellbeing.

René gives Bérard a "complicit" look because they share these sexist opinions. Madame Bérard's "robust constitution" is a reference to her physical stature. As a larger woman, René views her as less delicate and less feminine—which is to say more masculine—and he sees this as proof of Madame Bérard's strength and good health. This quote is not only another reflection of the sexist nature of early twentieth-century French society, it also establishes René's cruelty to his wife. This cruelty is in large part what fuels Isabelle's affair with Stephen, causing her to leave René and setting off the chain of events that leads to her pregnancy.

❝ Yet despite her formality toward him and her punctilious ease of manner, Stephen sensed some other element in what he had termed the pulse of her. It was impossible to say through which sense he had the impression, but somehow, perhaps only in the tiny white hairs on the skin of her bare arm or the blood he had seen rise beneath the light freckles of her cheekbones, he felt certain there was some keener physical life than she was actually living in the calm, restrictive rooms of her husband's house with its oval door handles of polished china and its neatly inlaid parquet floors.

Related Characters: René Azaire, Isabelle Azaire, Stephen Wraysford

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Stephen is just beginning to fall in love with Isabelle, and he has given her the code word "pulse" in his encrypted journals. Again, this quote serves to disrupt traditional gender stereotypes of women and female sexuality. Isabelle pretends to be what society expects her to be—that is, she pretends to be modest and attentive to her husband—but she is someone else entirely. The very source of who she is, her "pulse," is overtly sexual, and Stephen is able to sense this. This is reflected in Stephen's vaguely sexual references to Isabelle's bare skin and rising blood. Faulks's use of the word "pulse" carries additional connotations of blood and life, and it also carries hints of the red room, the physical symbol of Stephen and Isabelle's love.

Just as Stephen suspects, Isabelle' sexuality is restricted in her husband's home. René is threatened by Isabelle's strong sense of sexuality, and he comes to view her as a source of his own powerlessness. Because of this, René beats his wife instead of making love to her, and Stephen first hears Isabelle's stifled cries from behind the "oval door handles" of her bedroom. Isabelle's "pulse" is hidden beneath the perfectly polished façade of René's home and their loveless marriage.

❝ Azaire's gaze had filled with something like amusement. "I don't' like to think of you having some kind of fit. I could easily—."

"For goodness' sake, René," said Madame Azaire. "He's told you there's nothing to worry about. Why don't you just leave him alone?"

Azaire's fork made a loud clatter as he laid it down on his plate. For a moment his face had an expression of panic, like that of the schoolboy who suffers a sudden reverse and can't understand the rules of behaviour by which his rival has won approval. Then he began to smile sardonically, as though to indicate that really he knew best and that his decision not to argue further was temporary indulgence he was granting his juniors. He turned to his wife with a teasing lightness of manner.

Related Characters: Isabelle Azaire, René Azaire (speaker), Stephen Wraysford

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

This quote appears after Stephen leaves the factory cafeteria feeling faint. Stephen's symptoms are a result of

his guilt over aligning himself with René's poor treatment of his employees, but René's is unaware of this and has a history of treating Stephen badly. René repeatedly implies that Stephen is less of a man than he is in the eyes of his French society. Stephen's young age alone is proof of his powerlessness, according to René, and the fact that he is an Englishman does little to strengthen his case. Here, René's description of Stephen's ailment is very similar to his own description of Isabelle's physical complaints, and in this way René likens Stephen to a woman. He means to insult Stephen by implying he is at risk of "having some kind of fit," an irrational and emotional breakdown that plagues only women and weak men.

Isabelle sticks up for Stephen because she is very used to this type of treatment, and René's response to her is further evidence of his cruelty and misogyny. His expression turns to "panic," and for a moment he reverts back to a "schoolboy" because he is not used to being challenged by a woman. René practically dares Isabelle, and Stephen for that matter, to challenge his authority again, and then he covers up his aggression with his phony "teasing lightness of manner."

> "And have you heard your minstrel again in your wanderings in the town, my dear?"

She looked down at her plate. "I was not wandering, René. I was doing errands."

"Of course, my dear. My wife is a mysterious creature, Monsieur," he said to Stephen. "No one knows—like the little stream in the song—whither she flows or where her end will be."

Related Characters: Isabelle Azaire, René Azaire (speaker), Stephen Wraysford

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

This quote takes place during another one of the Azaire's dinnertime conversations with Stephen. Isabelle has challenged René's power and authority by sticking up for Stephen, and René is determined to make Isabelle pay for her disregard of his standing. Again, René speaks to Isabelle in a condescending way, calling the piano song she heard in town a "minstrel," implying that the tune must be a folksong because Isabelle is too simple and ignorant to appreciate the art of classical music. Even his use of the words "my dear" and "creature" serve to make Isabelle appear small, weak, and foreign compared to him, a man. He further makes Isabelle's daily life seem small when he refers to her errands as "wanderings" and compares her to the "little stream in the song." By comparing Isabelle to a stream, René implies that his wife is ineffectual and directionless—a small stream that simply swirls about without serving any real purpose. Everything René says to Isabelle is meant to demean her and cause her pain, thereby stripping her of any power she may have gained by daring to challenge René's authority.

> She was the only one who did not respond to Bérard's promptings. She barely contributed when he invited her to do so, but would speak, unbidden, on a subject of her own choice. This appeared to leave Bérard no choice but to cut her off. He would apologize with a small bow of his head, though not for some minutes, and not until he had taken the conversation safely down the path he wanted. Madame Azaire would shrug lightly or smile at his belated apology as though to suggest that what she had been about to say was unimportant.

Related Characters: Monsieur Bérard, Isabelle Azaire

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Isabelle endures yet another painful after-dinner conversation with Bérard. Like René, Bérard is a personification of the patriarchy, and he is filled with self-importance. He completely dominates every conversation he is part of—he selects the topics and decides who gets to speak and when—yet Isabelle resists him, and by extension, she resists the patriarchy as well. By ignoring Bérard's invitations to join his conversations and instead starting her own "unbidden," Isabelle implies that she won't be commanded to do what Bérard says.

Bérard's interruptions of Isabelle are further proof of his misogyny and the confines of her sexist society, and even his apology is full of disrespect. As a nod, Bérard's apology is merely the implication of an apology, and even then, he makes Isabelle wait several minutes for it, lessening it further. Interestingly, Bérard's apology suggests that he knows his behavior is unfair and inappropriate, otherwise he probably wouldn't even bother, but this potential realization means very little. Bérard refuses to let Isabelle

have a voice, even at her own dinner table, and this emphasizes the extent to which sexism affects her life.

language perpetuates the very same oppression that Isabelle is trying to escape.

Sometimes from the safety of the sitting room he would fix his eyes on the group and the vital, unspeaking figure of Madame Azaire. He didn't ask himself if she was beautiful, because the physical effect of her presence made the question insignificant. Perhaps in the harshest judgement of the term she was not. While everything was feminine about her face, her nose was slightly larger than fashion prescribed; her hair had more different shades of brown and gold and red than most women would have wanted. For all the lightness of her face, its obvious strength of character overpowered conventional prettiness. But Stephen made no judgements; he was motivated by compulsion.

Related Characters: Stephen Wraysford, Isabelle Azaire

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs as Stephen continues to fall in love with Isabelle, and it expresses Stephen's love and attraction to her. Stephen is so drawn to Isabelle that she does not even have to speak in order to command a room, and he considers her presence "vital," suggesting the entire interaction would cease to matter were she not part of it. Stephen's attraction to Isabelle is so deep that it transcends the shallow nature of surface physical beauty. Ironically, however, while this quote illustrates Stephen's love for Isabelle, it also reflects the sexist stereotypes of women present in French society during the early 1900s. Stephen's definition of feminine beauty is superficial and arbitrary.

Of course, Stephen believes that Isabelle is somehow above this ideal, but he still refers to the popular standards of beauty. From the size of Isabelle's nose to the color of her hair, Stephen is implicitly critical of her appearance. Even though he claims that her appearance is "insignificant," the mere mention of her lacking beauty suggests otherwise. According to Stephen, Isabelle's "obvious strength of character overpowered conventional prettiness," which in itself implies that conventional prettiness is somehow incompatible with strength of character. Stephen claims to make "no judgements," yet even he is not immune to them or the effects living in a sexist society. Stephen becomes angry when René and Bérard treat Isabelle badly, and he visibly disagrees with René's physical abuse of her, but his

[René] saw the production of further children as important proof of his standing in society and a confirmation that this was a balanced match in which his age and the difference in tastes were not important. He approached his wife in a businesslike and predatory manner; she reacted with the submissive indifference which was the only response he left open to her. He made love to her each night, though, once embarked on it, he seemed to want it to be over quickly. Afterward he never referred to what they had done together. Madame Azaire, who was initially frightened and ashamed, slowly became frustrated by her husband's attitude; she could not understand why this aspect of their lives, which seemed to mean so much to him, was something he would not talk about, nor why the startling intimacy of the act opened no doors in her mind, made no connections with the deeper feelings and aspirations that had grown in her since childhood.

Related Characters: Isabelle Azaire, René Azaire

Related Themes:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs as Faulks describes René and Isabelle's marriage, and it is further evidence of the sexism present in early twentieth-century French society. René views children as a reflection of his manhood and virility—the more children he has, the stronger he is—and his advancing age threatens this power. René views sex as merely a business transaction, one that will secure him more social power, and he leaves Isabelle's desires unrealized and her sexual needs unmet. René is resentful of Isabelle's youth and capabilities, and he completely lacks any romantic feelings for her. Sadly, his marriage to Isabelle is not a "balanced match," but it is not only René's age that makes the difference. Isabelle is a deeply sexual woman, and since society expects her to be modest and pure, this trait further threatens René's masculinity. René tries to regain his waning power through fear, but this too is ineffective, and René is further emasculated by sex. Ironically, the very act that is meant to define René's power within society is the source of his weakness.

René Azaire had no suspicions of what was happening in his house. He had allowed his feelings toward Isabelle to become dominated by anger and frustration at his physical impotence and by what he subsequently experienced as a kind of emotional powerlessness toward her. He did not love her, but he wanted her to more responsive toward him. He sensed that she felt sorry for him and this infuriated him further; if she could not love him then at least she should be frightened of him.

Related Characters: Stephen Wraysford, Isabelle Azaire, René Azaire

Related Themes:

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs as Stephen's affair with Isabelle heats up, and it also serves to highlight the sexist nature of twentieth-century French society through René's continued misogyny and self-importance. René refuses to see Stephen as a threat—after all, Stephen is young, undistinguished, and British—and René has no reason to believe that Isabelle has been unfaithful. René barely acknowledges Isabelle's existence beyond his domestic expectations of her, and he is certainly unaware, and unconcerned, of her unmet needs and desires. René's own insecurities over his advancing aging and diminishing social power have manifested in sexual impotence, he begins beating Isabelle in lieu of a traditional sexual release.

In this physical violence, René attempts to recoup some of his lost power and restore the rightful balance of the patriarchy. Strangely, while René openly admits that he does not love Isabelle, he seems to want her to love him quite badly, and this too is evidence of his insecurity. René has zero sexual interest in his wife beyond procreation, yet he wants her to be "more responsive toward him." René demands this responsiveness from his wife but does not reciprocate it. Instead, René believes that this is Isabelle's duty to him as a woman and his wife, and this if further evidence of their sexist society.

[René] remembered the pleasure he had taken in being the first man to invade that body, much younger than him, and the thrill he could not deny himself when she had cried out in pain. He remembered the puzzled look in her eyes when she gazed up at him. He could feel that she, more than his first wife, had the capacity to respond to the physical act, but when he saw the bewildered expression in her face he was determined to subdue it rather than to win her by patience. At that time Isabelle, though too willful for the father's taste, was still docile and innocent enough to have been won over by a man who showed consideration and love, but with Azaire these things were not forthcoming. Her emotional and physical appetites were awakened but then left suspended as her husband turned his energy toward a long, unnecessary battle with his own shortcomings.

Related Characters: Isabelle Azaire, René Azaire

Related Themes:

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

Here, René reflects back on the first time he had sex with Isabelle, his young wife, and considers the current state of their relationship. René is empowered by the act of taking Isabelle's virginity, and this is a reflection of the sexism and misogyny present in early twentieth-century French society. A good wife is chaste and pure—not tainted by previous sexual experiences, that is—and René is aroused by Isabelle's virginity and tender age. Furthermore, René's "thrill" in Isabelle's expression of pain during this initial encounter mirrors his sadistic enjoyment of beating Isabelle when he replaces sex with physical violence because of his impotence. René takes pleasure in Isabelle's pain.

The "puzzled look" in Isabelle's eyes reflects her own deeply sexual nature. Isabelle is aching to surrender to a man sexually, and René can sense this, but he doesn't care enough about her to nurture this desire. This quote implies that *any* man could have won Isabelle over with just a little bit of love and attention, but René has no interest in loving Isabelle. This quote also goes a long way in explaining why Isabelle so easily falls for Stephen only to leave him brokenhearted. Stephen fulfills Isabelle's "capacity to respond to the physical act," and while he may fall in love with her, Isabelle's interest in him is largely sexual. This representation of Isabelle disrupts traditional gender stereotypes of women as modest and sexually reserved. Instead of falling in deep romantic love with Stephen, Isabelle uses him to fulfill her sexual desires.

"I don't want this." Isabelle shook her head. The words came from her mouth without thought or calculation in their purity of feeling. "I don't know what to do or how to behave now. I could be happy in the simplest way, like any other woman with a family of her own, without this terrible pain I've caused. I won't listen to ether of you. Why should I? How do I know that you love me, Stephen? How can I tell?" Her voice fell to the low, soft note Stephen had heard when she spoke on his first evening in the house. It was a beautiful sound to his ears: pleading and vulnerable, but with a sense of strength in its own rightness. "And you, René, why should I trust you when you have given me so little reason even to like you?"

Related Characters: Isabelle Azaire (speaker), Stephen Wraysford, René Azaire

Related Themes:

Page Number: 92-3

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Isabelle admits to René that she and Stephen are having an affair. Stephen assumes that Isabelle will run away with him, but she is not so sure. The spontaneous nature of Isabelle's outburst is a testament to its truth. When she says, "I don't want this," she does so without thought or influence, and this suggests that Isabelle doesn't quite love Stephen as much as he loves her. When Isabelle claims that she "could be happy in the simplest way," this harks back to René's earlier thought that Isabelle was capable of loving any man who showed her love and affection, and it suggests that both René and Stephen have failed her in this respect. René certainly doesn't love Isabelle, and while Stephen claims to, she remains unconvinced.

René has given Isabelle "little reason" to like him because he beats her and demeans her. He belittles her time and her interests and considers her little better than one of the employees in his factory. Of course, Isabelle's job isn't to manufacture textiles; René sees her as a machine meant to churn out his children and secure him standing and influence within their sexist patriarchal society. Furthermore, Stephen, despite loving Isabelle, shows her little respect. He continues to pursue her when she asks him to stop and he assumes that she will leave René's children, Lisette and Grégoire, and run away with him. Neither of the men have loved Isabelle the way she wants to be loved, and this is the source of her ambivalence.

Part Two: France 1916 Quotes

None of these men would admit that what they saw and what they did were beyond the boundaries of human behaviour. You would not believe, Jack thought, that the fellow with his cap pushed back, joking with his friend at the window of the butcher's shop, had seen his other mate dying in a shellhole, gas frothing in his lungs. No one told; and Jack too joined the unspoken conspiracy that all was well, that no natural order had been violated. He blamed the NCOs, who blamed the officers; they swore at the staff officers, who blamed the generals.

Related Characters: Jack Firebrace

Related Themes:

Page Number: 136

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs in the early days of World War I, as Jack Firebrace works seemingly endless hours digging miles of British trenches in France. As a miner, Jack spends most of his time underground and is not an infantry soldier; however, this does not shelter him from the unspeakable violence and death of the war, and Jack feels complicit in this inhumanity. Like Lieutenant Stephen Wraysford, Jack is beginning to learn that there isn't a line the men won't cross, and these terrible acts are committed by little more than children.

Jack describes one of the soldiers as a "fellow with his cap pushed back" who "jokes with his friend at the window of the butcher's shop." While the butcher shop is certainly reflective of the carnage of the war, the rest of this description has the effect of making this soldier seem like a young boy, killing time between classes, not the trained killer responsible for the violence of the war. In Jack's description, these boys are too young to deal with the psychological and emotional trauma of what they have done, and of what has been done onto them.

Faulks's novel repeatedly refers to the war as a violation of the "natural order" or as a "crime against nature," and this quote reflects this as well. Jack, like many other soldiers, knows that the war is wrong, and he questions his own involvement—yet he does nothing. Instead, Jack and the others blindly follow orders and carry out the very acts they secretly condemn, and this highlights the inhumanity of the war.

In good humour, braving the barely understood the jeers of the washerwoman who stood by to take their clothes, the men queued naked for the baths that been set up in a long barn. Jack stood behind Shaw, admiring his huge back, with the muscles slabbed and spread out across his shoulder blades, so that his waist, though in fact substantial enough, looked like a nipped-in funnel by comparison, above the dimple of the coccyx and fatty swell of his hair-covered buttocks.

Related Characters: Arthur Shaw, Jack Firebrace

Related Themes:

Page Number: 137

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Jack and the other miners line up to take a rare bath during the war. This quote illustrates the humiliating nature of this task—they must strip naked out in the open, and they bathe in a barn like livestock. In addition to highlighting the hardships of war, Faulks also disrupts popular gender stereotypes with Jack's admiration of Shaw's body. The way Jack "admires" Shaw's physique, noting his swollen muscles and strength, is vaguely sexual, and the parts of his body he lingers on—Shaw's chest, waist, and buttocks—are typically what a man notices on a woman's body. Jack notes that Shaw's waist appears like a "nipped-in funnel," and this too conjures thoughts of a slender feminine body, certainly not the body of man. Jack and Shaw's relationship is not sexual, however, but is instead based on mutual reliance and understanding of their impossible existence during the war. Jack and Shaw share a deep comradery and love that helps them get through the darkest days of war, and by describing them in this intimate and tender manner, Faulks challenges mainstream society's image of men as aggressive and macho.

"No one in England knows what this is like. If they could see the way these men live they would not believe their eyes. This is not a war, this is an exploration of how far men can be degraded. I am deeply curious to see how much further it can be taken; I want to know. I believe that it has barely started. I believe that far worse things than we have seen will be authorized and will be carried out by millions of boys and men like my Tipper and your Firebrace. There is no depth to which they can't be driven."

Related Characters: Stephen Wraysford (speaker), Tipper, Jack Firebrace, Michael Weir

Related Themes:

Page Number: 145

Explanation and Analysis

Here, after fighting for over a year, Stephen offers Weir his own opinion of the war. Like many of the soldiers and officers, Stephen initially believed in the war. It seemed a worthy cause, and no one thought that it would last long. However, World War I saw death and destruction on an unprecedented scale, including the targeting of civilians, and the violent nature of their existence as soldiers is unimaginable. Stephen believes that there is no end to the inhumanity, and worse, that innocent men like Firebrace and Tipper are expected to carry out unspeakable acts on behalf of their superior officers. While Firebrace is an older man nearing fifty who finds strength in his faith in God and his love for his son, Tipper is a young man horribly afflicted by shellshock. His psyche has broken long ago under the stress of the war and what is expected of him, but newspaper articles fail to relay the personal and human side of the war, and they could never capture the daily horror Tipper and the other men live with. According to Stephen, the war has no point, no greater purpose or cause, and serves only to corrupt and rob men of their morals and ethics. In this way, Faulks highlights not only the horrors of war, but the violent potential of humankind.

"I know you go out on patrol with [the men] and bind up their wounds and so on. But do you love them? Will you give your life for them?"

Stephen felt himself closely scrutinized. He could have said, "Yes, sir," and closed the conversation; but Gray's informal hectoring manner, although unsettling, permitted frankness.

"No," he said. "I suppose not."

"I thought so," said Gray, with a small triumphant laugh. "Is that because you value your own life too much? You think it's worth more than some simple footsoldier's?"

"Not at all. I'm a simple footsoldier myself, don't forget. It was you who promoted me. It's because I don't value my life enough. I have no sense of the scale of the sacrifices. I don't know what anything is worth."

Related Characters: Captain Gray , Stephen Wraysford (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 159

Explanation and Analysis

This quote also occurs during the early stages of the war, and it is a perfect reflection of Stephen's empty heart and loveless life. As an orphan, Stephen has never known the love of another. Both his mother and father abandon him as a child, and while Stephen briefly lives with his grandparents, he is not given the attention or affection other children typically know. Even when a local social reformer shows interest in Stephen and begins to mentor him, his efforts are focused on Stephen's education and future career, not his emotional needs or wellbeing. Growing up this way deeply affects the man Stephen becomes, and he can't relate to the men in his charge who fight the war on behalf of their loved ones—their wives, children, friends, and parents. Isabelle is the only person Stephen has ever loved, and she leaves him heartbroken in a foreign country, without so much as a goodbye or an explanation. Without this love in his life, Stephen can't appreciate how much the individual lives of his soldiers are worth. Stephen tolerates his men—he picks up their broken bodies and holds them as they die because it is expected of him—but he doesn't love them. Since Stephen has never been truly loved, he doesn't quite know how to love another.

> Jack tried not to imagine the weight of earth on top of them. He did not think of the roots of trees, stretching down through the soil. In any case they were too deep now. He had always survived in London by picturing the tunnel in which he worked as a railway compartment at night: the shutters were closed over a small space, you could not see anything, but outside a wide world of trees and fields beneath an open sky was whistling safely by in the darkness. When the space was no more than three feet wide and he had the earth pressing in his mouth and eyes, the illusion became difficult to sustain.

Related Characters: Jack Firebrace

Related Themes:

Page Number: 161

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Jack Firebrace is once again deep beneath the French soil digging British trenches during World War I. As a career miner, Jack is accustomed to life underground (he spent countless dark and dirty days digging London's subway tunnel), but all this experience does not prepare him for the depths he sinks to during the war. Faulks repeatedly references nature throughout *Birdsong* and the cruel way it carries on during the war in complete disregard of the widespread human pain and suffering. Back in London, Jack was comforted by the presence of nature outside the cramped darkness of the tunnel, but he is too deep underground to rely on this thought now. The physical depth of the tunnel Jack digs metaphorically represents how deep Jack has fallen from righteousness during the war. Even though Jack is a laborer and not a soldier, his digging makes it possible for the men to fight and because of this he is complicit in the unspeakable acts of the war. Faulks has already established that nature is indifferent to the acts of humankind, and the imagery of tree roots reaching deep beneath the soil and still being unable to touch Jack reflects far Jack has fallen morally.

> If night would fall, the earth might resume its natural process, and perhaps, in many years' time, what had happened during daylight could be viewed as an aberration, could be comprehended within the rhythm of a normal life. At the moment it seemed to Stephen to be the other way about: that this was the new reality, the world in which they were now condemned to live, and that the pattern of the seasons, of night and day, was gone.

Related Characters: Stephen Wraysford

Related Themes:

Page Number: 224-5

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Stephen and the other soldiers charge across No Man's Land and attack the German forces. The attack is badly planned and poorly executed, and Stephen is trapped behind enemy lines. This passage relies heavily on images of nature and the physical world, such as the earth and changing of the seasons, and it reflects Stephen's belief that the war is a crime against nature and humanity. He refers to the war as an "aberration," and struggles to understand its meaning and his place within in. He doubts that the war has a purpose and he fails to see how it benefits the greater good. As Stephen prays for the deadly day to end, he wants to believe that what they have done, and the death and destruction they have caused, will be cleansed by the darkness somehow, or at least lessened by the passing of time.

Sadly, Stephen knows that the war will never be

comprehended and the pain will not lessened over time. For all of eternity, humankind will have to live with this new reality—one that has known this level of death and depravity. In this way, Faulks argues the importance of remembrance of the war—even the unspeakable violence it entailed. While the war may never be comprehended, it does serve as a powerful reminder of the horrific acts humankind is capable of.

Part Three: England 1978 Quotes

In the tunnel of the Underground, stalled in the darkness, Elizabeth Benson sighed in impatience. She wanted to be home to see if there were any letters or in case the telephone should ring. A winter coat was pressed in her face by the crush of passengers along the aisle of the carriage. Elizabeth pulled her small suitcase closer to her feet. She had returned from a two-day business trip to Germany that morning and had gone straight in to work from Heathrow without returning to her flat. With the lights out she could not see to read her paper. She closed her eyes and tried to let her imagination remove her from the still train and its tightfitting hole.

Related Characters: Jack Firebrace, Elizabeth Benson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 233

Explanation and Analysis

This quote introduces Elizabeth Benson and her modern life in London in 1978, decades after her grandfather fought in World War I alongside Jack Firebrace. *Birdsong* highlights the impact of the past on future generations and considers the ways in which the past lives on in the present, and Elizabeth's mundane daily commute does not escape these touches of the past. Stalled in the darkness, this gloomy underground world mirrors the darkness of the World War I trenches. Much like the men in the trenches, Elizabeth tries to imagine that she is not in this "tightfitting hole," and the cramped passengers of the car mimics the soldiers squeezing into tiny dugouts to sleep or eat. Furthermore, the very tunnel where Elizabeth now sits was dug tirelessly by Jack Firebrace and the other miners whose efforts in large part secured the victory of the war. Because of the war and the efforts of these forgotten men, Elizabeth is able to freely travel between London and Germany, a task that has not always been so simple. Yet Elizabeth has no idea about the history of the tunnel or the men who dug it, and this represents society's ignorance of the past. Faulks's novel seeks to uncover the past and draw meaningful connections between past and present generations.

"What do you do?" he said to Elizabeth.

"I run a clothing company." She disliked being asked this question, thinking people ought to ask new acquaintances who they were rather than what they did, as though their job defined them.

"You say you run it. You're the boss, are you?"

"That's right. I started out as a designer about fifteen years ago but I transferred to the business side. We formed a new company and I became managing director."

Related Characters: Stuart, Elizabeth Benson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 236

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Elizabeth has just been introduced to Stuart by her friend Lindsay, and he asks Elizabeth what she does for a living. Elizabeth represents a modern Englishwoman; she is fiercely independent, and she won't be defined by her gender or what she does for a living. There is more to Elizabeth's identity than who she is professionally—she is loving and loyal, and as evidenced by her relationship with Brennan, an aging and disabled war veteran, Elizabeth is an inherently good person—but Stuart equates her value to her job. Furthermore, Stuart is a representation of the patriarchy and the confines of Elizabeth's sexist society. Stuart asks Elizabeth to clarify what she means by "I run a clothing company" because he believes that such powerful and important jobs are reserved for men. Surely, Elizabeth is capable of sewing the clothes, or perhaps designing them, but her status as a woman means that she shouldn't have the skills needed to actually run the company. Stuart seems dubious over Elizabeth's professional accomplishments, and this reflects the widespread assumption that women are somehow less capable and skilled than men.

Part Four: France 1917 Quotes

Stephen felt, at the better moments, the love for them that Gray had demanded. Their desperate courage, born from necessity, was nevertheless endearing. The grimmer, harder, more sardonic they became, the more he cared for them. Still he could not quite believe them; he could not comprehend the lengths to which they allowed themselves to be driven. He had been curious to see how far they could be taken, but his interest had slackened when he saw the answer: that there were no boundaries they would not cross, no limits to what they would endure.

Related Characters: Captain Gray , Stephen Wraysford

Related Themes:

Page Number: 270

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs as World War I rages on and Stephen begins to finally feel love for the soldiers he commands. Thus far, Stephen has been driven on and sustained by his hate. His lonely and loveless childhood as an orphan and the pain caused by the abandonment of his lover, Isabelle, before the war has left him cold and detached. He finds strength in the contempt he feels for his German enemy and he sees only the worst in the soldiers he commands, largely viewing them as weak subordinates who will do whatever their commanding officers say. However, due to Stephen's unexpected friendship with Michael Weir, another officer in the war, his hate is slowly beginning to thaw. Stephen loves Weir, and because of this, he looks at his men in a different light. Stephen respects their resilience and willingness to keep fighting through unimaginable odds, but this is the very thing that troubles him the most—their willingness to keep killing. Stephen speaks of the lengths the men allow themselves to be driven and marvels at how far they go, yet he fails to acknowledge that he has been driven to these very same lengths. Stephen can't fully love his men because he can't fully love himself, and he is deeply ashamed of the heinous acts they have committed during the course of the war.

Stephen felt himself overtaken by a climatic surge of feeling. It frightened him because he thought it would have some physical issue, in spasm or bleeding to death. Then he saw that what he felt was not an assault but a passionate affinity. It was for the rough field running down to the trees and for the path going back into the village, where he could see the tower of the church: these and the forgiving distance of the sky were not separate, but part of one creation, and he too, still by any sane judgement a young man, by the repeated tiny pulsing of his blood, was one with them.

Related Characters: Stephen Wraysford

Related Themes:

Page Number: 348

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Stephen has been forced to take a furlough home to England during the war, and he is aimlessly walking along the British countryside. The abject horror of the war has left Stephen doubting humanity and the basic goodness of men, and he considers the murderous acts of the war a crime against nature. This passage is significant because Stephen is metaphorically cleansed by nature, the very thing that has been violated by his actions during the war. For the first time since his affair with Isabelle, Stephen is suddenly able to feel, and this "surge" of emotion is made possible because of nature.

Faulks's description of this feeling as a "passionate affinity" mirrors the deep emotion of Stephen's previous relationship with Isabelle, and in the English countryside, nature is no longer indifferent to Stephen's existence. On the French battlefields, flowers grow and birds sing unaffected while men suffer and die. Here, nature is not only aware of Stephen, it is accepting of him and he feels at one with it. The sky and the church in the distance inspires optimism and a sense faith, and Stephen's epiphany-like experience provides him a much-needed push going into the end of the war.

Part Five: England 1978-79 Quotes

I do not know what I have done to live in this existence. I do not know what any of us did to tilt the world into this unnatural orbit. We came here only for a few months. No child or future generation with ever know what this was like. They will never understand. When it is over we will go quietly among the living and we will not tell them. We will talk and sleep and go about our business like hum beings. We will seal what we have seen in the silence of our hearts and no words will reach us.

Related Characters: Stephen Wraysford (speaker), Elizabeth Benson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 403

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is written by Stephen in his encrypted journal to describe the war, and it is read by his granddaughter, Elizabeth, nearly seventy years later. Stephen implies that his horrific life as a soldier during the war is punishment for past sins. He believes that the war is a crime against nature, and this is reflected in the "unnatural orbit" the world has been tilted into. These coded words in Stephen's journal are evidence of the deep shame and profound pain he feels due to his involvement in the war, and he buries them in an effort to forget. In this vein, Stephen's encrypted journal represents society's broader efforts to cover up or obscure painful history. Just as Stephen says, he never speaks of the war once it is over. He remains largely mute for nearly two years after he returns home, and he doesn't even tell his wife about the things he has done. Through Stephen's journals, Faulks brings history and the past into the present, and Elizabeth discovers that the war is just as important today as it ever was. Elizabeth has much to learn from the past, and while she may never fully understand it, history lends valuable insight into her modern life.

Part Six: France 1918 Quotes

❝ Gray stood up and came around the desk. "Think of the words on that memorial, Wraysford. Think of those stinking towns and foul bloody villages whose names will be turned into some bogus glory by fat-arsed historians who have sat in London. We were there. As our punishment of God knows what, we were there, and our men did in each of those disgusting places. I hate their names. I hate the sound of them and the thought of them, which is why I will not bring myself to remind you. But listen." He put his face close to Stephen's. "There are four words they will chisel beneath them at the bottom. Four words that people will look at one day. When they read the other words they will want to vomit. When they read these, they will bow their heads, just a little. 'Final advance and pursuit.' Don't tell me you don't want to put your name to those words."

Related Characters: Captain Gray (speaker), Stephen Wraysford

Related Themes:

Page Number: 409

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs during the end of the war after Captain Gray asks Stephen what he thinks will be inscribed on their monument after the war. Gray refers to their list of actions as a "proud list," only Stephen doesn't feel pride; he feels only shame and hate. Gray's response to Stephen reflects the pain and destruction of the war with words like "stinking towns" and "foul bloody villages," but it also calls into question the historical accuracy of official documents. He refers to this history as "bogus glory," and to Gray, it is as fake and uniformed as the "fat-arsed historians" who record it. Gray implies that the only people who will ever know the truth about the war are the men who fought it.

This passage raises important questions about monuments and the commemoration of war. Stephen doesn't feel any pride in what he has done in the war, and he doesn't believe that such heinous acts should be memorialized. Of course, the purpose of such a monument is to honor and remember the brave men who fought for their country; however, when people look at it, as Gray says, "they will want to vomit." Interestingly enough, when Stephen's granddaughter, Elizabeth, visits the very same monument nearly seventy years in the future, she is the only one there, save for a man sweeping the sidewalk, and the monument does little to remind people what men like Stephen went through. Elizabeth herself never knew about the monument until she visits it that day, and she is visibly struck by the fact that she didn't know how bad the war had really been. In this way, Faulks argues that there are better ways of remembering the war and honoring veterans and fallen soldiers, such as Elizabeth's friendship with Brennan later in the novel and her interest in her grandfather's story.

❝ Levi looked at this wild-eyed figure, half-demented, his brother's killer. For no reason he could tell, he found that he had opened his own arms in turn, and the two men fell upon each other's shoulders, weeping at the bitter strangeness of their human lives.

Related Characters: Stephen Wraysford, Lieutenant Levi

Related Themes:

Page Number: 463

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs at the very end of the war as Stephen is rescued from a collapsed tunnel by Levi, an enemy German soldier. Faulks' description of Stephen as a "wild-eyed" and "half-demented" killer reflects the violent nature of the war. Stephen has been trapped under the French soil for over six days with a dying man, and the last explosion he let off in his attempt to escape resulted in the death of Levi's brother. Up to now, Stephen has been motivated by his hate and it, along with a small mud puddle, has kept him alive in the depths of the tunnel. Of course, Stephen's hate cannot sustain him, and even though he is prepared to keep fighting, he surrenders to Levi's act of love. Levi, a devout Jewish man, is guided by his faith and claims that it alone will tell him what to do when he meets his enemy. While Levi's faith serves as the source of this love, it also carries a more solemn connotation. The county Levi fights for and claims to love will soon turn on him and his Jewish faith, sparking another unspeakable world war. For now, however, as the men surrender to love after such hate and violence has passed, Faulks argues the power of love over even the strongest hate.

Part Seven: England 1979 Quotes

❝ He threw the chestnuts up into the air in his great happiness. In the tree above him they disturbed a roosting crow, which erupted from the braches with an explosive bang of its wings, then rose toward the sky, its harsh, ambiguous call coming back in long, grating waves toward the earth, to be heard by those still living.

Related Characters: Elizabeth Benson, Robert

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 483

Explanation and Analysis

These are the closing lines of *Birdsong*, and Elizabeth has just given birth to Robert's son. This quote reflects Robert's happiness at the birth of his son, but more than that, it serves as a grave warning. Robert's happiness "disturbs" a crow, and while birds and birdsongs typically symbolize nature, life, and optimism within Faulks's novel, this bird's song is much more pessimistic. Crows can also be seen to symbolize bad luck or death, and while the birth of Robert's son, John, named after the son of a World War I veteran, represents the hope of a better future while honoring the past, this optimism is somewhat guarded. Stephen's story and the unspeakable violence of the war is a lesson in the potentially evil ways of humankind, and the crow's song is a reminder of this danger. This too is reflected in Faulks's use of descriptive language. The bird doesn't simply fly off, it "erupts" with an "explosive bang" that is reminiscent of a shot from a rifle. Its call is "harsh" and "ambiguous," suggestive of its hidden message, and it is heard by only the living. The crow and its call carry connotations of the war, and it is a warning to always remember the past.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART ONE: FRANCE 1910

The Azaires' home stands proudly on the boulevard du Cange, an unassuming street in the French city of Amiens. The street is surrounded by nature; gardens with a "wild, overgrown look," numerous trees, and small canals which lead to the river Somme. The house is curiously built, with a strange shape and angles, and it has a "formidable front door." The traffic leading to the house suggests that it is the home of a "substantial man." The interior is plain and unassuming, and the strange shape of the house lends to mysterious rooms and passageways. It is "a place of unseen footsteps."

The house on the boulevard du Cange is a reflection of René Azaire, the patriarch of the family, and his power. Like the front door, René is a "formidable" man, and according to his standing in society, quite "substantial." The interior of the house is a reflection of René's wife, Isabelle. She too is "mysterious" and "unassuming," and Faulks's comparison of Isabelle to the domestic sphere underscores the sexist society in which they live. The "wild" and "overgrown" gardens are evidence of nature and its indifference to human life, and leading to the river Somme (where the bloodiest battle of World War I will take place), the neglected gardens also foreshadow the future violence of war.

Stephen Wraysford unpacks his belongings from a metal trunk in one of the bedrooms. Like the rest of the house, the room is plain but tastefully decorated, and flowers sit in a vase on the dresser. He cleans up and dresses for dinner, but the house is huge and he is unsure of which door to go through. In his confusion, a maid directs him into the dining room.

Again, the interior of the home is a reflection of Isabelle. Stephen later notes that Isabelle is not beautiful, yet she is alluring and wears the latest fashions better than any other woman. Like the room, Isabelle is "plain but tastefully decorated." The confusing floorplan of the house and Stephen's inability to find the dining room makes his ease in locating the red room after he falls in love with Isabelle all the more significant.

The Azaires are already seated at the table. Madame Azaire stands up and her husband, René, introduces her quickly and dismissively. The children, Lisette, who is sixteen, and Grégoire, who is ten, are also present. It is quickly established that Stephen is twenty years old and has been sent by his employer to learn about the process of textile manufacturing from René, who owns two local factories. René is only forty years old but looks much older, and he has "an alert, humourless glare."

The way in which René introduces Isabelle to Stephen is an example of René's indifference to his wife. The fact that Isabelle stands when Stephen enters the room is also a reflection of their sexist society. Isabelle stands as a sign of respect and observation of Stephen's standing as a man. René, who holds more power than Stephen on account of his age and class, does not stand to greet him.

René mentions that the laborers' unions have made it difficult for him to run his business, and the workers are unhappy about new machinery that threatens to replace their labor. As Lisette flirts obviously with Stephen, Madame Azaire avoids eye contact with him. Just as dinner ends, the doorbell rings and Monsieur Bérard and his wife, Madame Bérard, are shown into the room by the maid.

René's failure to recognize the needs of his workers is an example of his cruelty and immorality, and this, evidenced by Isabelle's lack of eye contact and her future efforts to aid the striking dyers and their hungry families, is a major source of Isabelle's dislike for her husband. Lisette's flirty behavior foreshadows her later sexual advances toward Stephen.

The friends begin to talk over drinks, and Bérard tells René that the dyers employed by other factories have called a strike to begin the next day. René is upset by the strike; however, Bérard appears to enjoy delivering the bad news. Bérard begins small talk, and Stephen mentions he is from England.

Bérard is a self-important man, and he fiercely holds on to his place within the patriarchy. As the bearer of important news that René is unaware of, Bérard considers this proof of his superior standing in society—above even René.

Bérard and René are subtly critical of England. They are surprised when Stephen says that they have trains there, and they make mention of the constant rain and fog. Stephen remarks that last year it rained more in Paris than in London, but the men continue. They ask Stephen if he eats meat most days for breakfast, and when he says he does, they are incredulous.

As Frenchmen, Bérard and René consider themselves better than Stephen, an Englishman. Their opinions about their countries are false, much like their opinions about women, yet they continue to believe them and profess them as truth. René and Bérard's power and superiority within patriarchal society are arbitrary and manufactured, and this interaction draws attention to this fact.

As the friends talk, **birds** can be heard singing from the garden. René mentions that he has a fondness for patriotic songs, such as "Marseillaise," which the French troops sang as they went off to fight the Prussians. "What a day that must have been!" declares René. Bérard disagrees, claiming that when "art is put to practical ends it loses its essential purity." Stephen says that any song that elicits an emotional response should be valued.

The birds singing in the garden reflect nature and its indifference to humankind. The evening has not been enjoyable for Stephen (or Isabelle), yet the birds sing on unaffected, just as they will during the darkest days of war. The mention of troops and patriotic songs reflects the future singing of British troops through French streets during World War I; however, the soldiers lack the enthusiasm that René imagines. Exhausted and war weary, the men's singing "loses its essential purity," just as Bérard says.

René suggests a game of cards, and Madame Azaire excuses herself, claiming that she has a "slight headache." Madame Bérard is appropriately concerned, but René reassures her. "It's just her nerves. Think nothing of it." Bérard notes that Madame Azaire is "a delicate creature," and René remarks on her "nervous temperament," which in his opinion "signifies nothing."

René and Bérard are completely dismissive of Isabelle and her well-being. They assume that her complaint is simply a symptom of her womanhood and her "delicate" nature. To René and Bérard, Isabelle is weak because she is a woman.

As the foursome play cards, talk turns to the dyers' strike. René states that what the dyers really need is "someone to call their bluff." He doesn't believe that the strike will last long once they become hungry. Bérard warns René that as a town councilor, that may not be the smartest course of action. René quickly dismisses him.

This is more evidence of René's cruelty and his questionable morality. He cares very little if the families of the dyers are suffering; instead, René would rather wait the workers out and secure the absolute best working agreement for himself and the other factory owners. The suffering of the workers' families mirrors the suffering of soldiers' families during the war. There is a greater tragedy beyond the initial death caused by war; the families are likewise affected.

Bérard and his wife soon leave, and it begins to rain. Stephen excuses himself to his room, where he sits and listens to the sounds of the night. An **owl** calls in the distance, and Stephen begins to write in his journal. He has kept the journal for five years now, and he encrypts his writing in a secret code, made possible by his extensive education in Greek and Latin. Stephen's need for secrecy stems from his "natural openness and quick temper," which often gets him into trouble. Stephen has learned "not to trust his responses, but to wait and be watchful."

As an orphan, and later as an officer during the war, Stephen's life is full of loss and pain, and his coded journals are an effort to hide his painful past. The coded journals reflect society's broader efforts to cover up or obscure painful history. Additionally, his "quick temper" and distrust of his own actions implies humankind's potential to commit terrible acts. Stephen is mindful of this danger, and his journal allows him to further reflect on his actions, which is in keeping with Faulks's overall argument for the commemoration of history and war. Again, nature, in the form of rain and birdcalls, continues on with complete disregard for Stephen.

He is distracted from his writing by the sound of a woman's voice. The sound is vague, but Stephen senses that something is wrong, and he sneaks down the stairs to investigate. He hears crying and the unmistakable sound of someone being struck. He recognizes Madame Azaire's voice begging René, and Stephen clenches his fists in anger, before slipping back up the stairs to his room undetected.

Stephen senses that René is abusing Isabelle and it makes him angry, yet he does nothing. The status quo of patriarchal society gives this power to René, and even though Stephen knows it is wrong, he doesn't says anything. Similarly, when Stephen is commanded to lead dozens of men to certain death during the war, he follows orders despite deep feelings to the contrary. Through Stephen's tendency to go with the flow, Faulks illustrates how patriarchal power and violence are maintained within society.

Stephen returns to his journal entries. His journey from England, the train through France, and René Azaire and his children are all noted in the pages. Stephen has even mentioned Bérard and his wife, but he is surprised to discover that he has not mentioned Madame Azaire in the journal at all.

Stephen does not mention Isabelle in his journal because he is already falling in love with her. His avoidance is a form of self-preservation; if he doesn't mention her, then he can't be in love with her.

The next day, Stephen accompanies René to his factory, which is located in a poverty-stricken area of town called the Saint Leu quarter. He meets Meyraux, René's senior man who acts as a messenger between René and his workers. Most of the factory workers are women, and they work mostly by hand, a process that Stephen considers "old-fashioned."

It is highly ironic that most of René's workers are women. He clearly does not respect women, yet they are responsible for making the bulk of his money. The fact that Stephen considers their work "old-fashioned" is evidence of women's standing in a sexist society—modern machines are preferred over their work.

René informs Meyraux that Stephen is visiting from a textile company in Manchester, which happens to sell the same fabric as René for two-thirds of the price. Stephen's company is one of René's most important customers, and René hopes that they are considering investing in his own factory.

Despite his patriarchal power and importance, René's control is slipping. He is in danger of losing his company due to cheaper foreign competitors, and because of this he resents Stephen.

Meyraux is suspicious of Stephen, and suspects that René is looking to import English workers and machinery, costing French jobs. Meyraux notes that what the industry really needs, instead of less workers and more machinery, is more investment and understanding on behalf of owners.

Meyraux is well versed in René's cruelty and lax morals. René's employees are on the verge of a strike because René has neglected them and treated them poorly, much like he treats Isabelle.

René claims he doesn't have any money to invest in the business, and instead can "only retrench." René proposes cutting the pay of salaried employees by one percent and raising output by five percent. In addition, he will reclassify any employees not qualified to run machinery as "untrained workers" and adjust their pay accordingly.

René's proposal to pay his employees less while expecting them to work harder and produce more is further proof of his cruelty and desire for power. The use of the word "retrench" to describe René's efforts to economize carries connotations of the upcoming war, which is fought mainly in the trenches.

Meyraux is calm and unsurprised, and remarks that René is offering his workers less than the striking dyers. René calls their strike "nonsense" and demands to know who is behind it. "What is behind it," says Meyraux, "are attempts of the owners to use slave labour at diminishing levels of pay." Meyraux does, however, identify Lucien Lebrun as an important player in the strike.

Again, René is harsh and dismissive of his employees. He considers their plight to be "nonsense" and not worth his time, and Meyraux's reference to "slave labor" highlights René's poor treatment of them. Birdsong *underscores humankind's capacity to behave in cruel ways, and through the character of René, Faulks implies that this is not limited to acts of war, but is also present in society as well.*

René quickly dismisses Lucien as a threat and continues his disagreement with Meyraux. As the two men bicker, Stephen's thoughts wonder to Azaire's mansion and his quiet wife. Stephen's thoughts are interrupted by René looking for support and agreement in his argument. Stephen quickly agrees and turns his thoughts back to Madame Azaire, momentarily disturbed by how easily he acquiesced to René. Meyraux refuses to continue the discussion in Stephen's presence. "Of course," Stephen says. "Nothing personal."

Through this interaction, Faulks again underscores how power is maintained in an unfair society. Stephen suspects that he doesn't agree with René's argument, yet he supports him anyway because it is expected of him (and he is distracted by his feelings for Isabelle). Stephen claims that this is "nothing personal," yet it personally affects René's workers in a negative way.

Later, back in his room, Stephen uses the code word "pulse" for Madame Azaire in the pages of his journal. He thinks of her as perfect; attractive and fashionable, yet modest and unrevealing. Despite her perfection, he detects "some other element" as her "pulse," and Stephen is convinced that there is "some keener physical life than she was actually living in the calm, restrictive rooms of her husband's house."

Stephen's use of the word "pulse" is symbolic of his growing love for Isabelle. "Pulse" has connotations of life, blood, and the color red, which harkens to the red room, where Stephen and Isabelle's love is realized. This "keener physical life" is born within the red room, and since René has forgotten that this room exists, it is somehow outside of his "restrictive" house.

Days later, René suggests that Meyraux bring Stephen with him to eat lunch with the factory workers. He does, and on the third day of this, Stephen abruptly leaves in the middle of lunch, claiming to feel "faint."

Stephen feels "faint" because he feels guilty. He has aligned himself with René and his poor treatment of his workers, and as such, Stephen is complicit in René's immoral acts.

The next day, René asks Stephen if he is feeling better, and he quickly dismisses his symptoms as a reaction to the dying chemicals used in nearby factories, which make it hard for him to breathe. René seems amused by Stephen's vague upset and suggests a doctor, claiming, "I don't like to think of you having some kind of fit."

René treats Stephen with the same condescending and dismissive manner with which he treats Isabelle. René's comparison of Stephen's symptoms to a "fit" is vaguely feminine, and he seems amused because he believes Stephen's complaints are nonsense—just like Isabelle's.

Madame Azaire quickly tells René to leave Stephen alone. After all, she says, he says he's fine. René appears irritated, but then he "smiles sardonically" and asks his wife if she has heard her "minstrel" again in her "wanderings in town." Madame Azaire corrects her husband, claiming that she doesn't wander but "runs errands." He dismisses her again, and Stephen must suppress the urge to defend her.

Isabelle is quite used to René's insults, and this is why she objects on Stephen's behalf. René "smiles sardonically" as a way of warning Isabelle not to challenge him, and then he insults her daily routine, which implies that her life is trivial. Again, Stephen knows that René's treatment of Isabelle is abusive and wrong, yet he says nothing, allowing René's power to run unchecked.

Bérard and his wife stop by again after dinner, as they do on most evenings, and this time they bring along Madame Bérard's mother, who insists on being called Aunt Elise. Bérard, an "authority on the important families in town" and himself of "superior breeding," commands the conversation. Madame Azaire mostly ignores him, interrupting occasionally to introduce topics of her own choosing, leaving Bérard "no choice but to cut her off," which he apologizes for with a "small bow of his head." Stephen is captivated by Madame Azaire, and while she is not beautiful in a traditional way, he is "motivated by compulsion" to be near her.

Here, Bérard's patriarchal power is on full display, and so is Isabelle's resistance to it. Bérard dominates the conversation because, as a man, he believes that what he has to say is of superior importance; however, Isabelle's multiple interruptions challenge this. Bérard does have a choice—he could simply let her speak—but he won't allow Isabelle even this small freedom. Bérard views Isabelle's attempts to introduce conversation topics as a direct threat to his power and masculinity.

The next day, Stephen finds Madame Azaire in the garden cutting roses. He boldly approaches her and removes the shears from her hands. As he begins to cut, he realizes that he has no idea what he is doing. "Let me," says Madame Azaire, as she instructs Stephen on how to properly cut the flowers.

Isabelle is empowered by her knowledge of the roses. Stephen is ignorant of this simple task, and for once Isabelle is able to command a conversation, even if only for a short time.

Stephen thinks to himself that Madame Azaire has "intrigue and worldliness beyond her obvious position," and in the course of their short conversation, she reveals that Lisette and Grégoire are her step-children. Their mother had died two years earlier, and she is René's second wife. Suddenly, Stephen reaches out and grabs Madame Azaire's hand "without thinking."

Stephen grabs Isabelle's hand after he discovers that Lisette and Grégoire are not her biological children, because he no longer views them as her responsibility. If they were her own children, she would have a duty to them (as dictated by society), but since they are not, Stephen considers her off the hook, and free to love him.

Madame Azaire begs Stephen to let go of her hand, yet she doesn't loosen her grip. Stephen asks her about the sounds he heard that night in the hallway, and she continues to protest. "You must respect my position," she states. Stephen lets go of her hand and responds, "I will," before leaving the garden.

Stephen's use of the phrase "I will" suggests that he will respect Isabelle's position sometime in the future, perhaps when she is his wife, but certainly not as René's wife. This phrase also reflects Isabelle's powerlessness in a sexist society. She asks Stephen not to pursue her, but he doesn't respect her voice.

The next day, Stephen is eating his lunch in a café when he sees Madame Azaire walk by. He quickly pays and runs to catch up with her. She is surprised to see him, and suddenly, the door of a nearby building opens and a friendly man invites her inside. She identifies Stephen as a friend, and the man invites him inside as well.

Again, Stephen does not respect Isabelle's pleas not to pursue her, and he advances on her whenever possible. Stephen is eating his lunch in a café because he is still feeling guilty about agreeing with René's questionable business practices, and he is unable to bring himself to eat with the factory workers.

The man introduces himself as Lucien Lebrun, and he explains to Stephen that he lives in a small apartment in the building with five other people. Lucien turns to Madame Azaire and, addressing her comfortably, asks if she has heard the good news about the men who were able to go back to work.

Stephen finds the comfortable way in which Lucien and Isabelle interact suspicious and suggestive of an affair. This assumption is too a product of misogyny; Isabelle can't have a relationship with a man unless it is sexual.

Madame Azaire turns to Stephen, sensing his confusion, and explains that she brings food to Lucien to pass around to the dyers and their families who are in need, since many of them "find it hard to live." René doesn't know, she claims, but since the dyers don't technically work for him, she doesn't consider her "Christian charity" a betrayal. "You mustn't think badly of me," she says. "I am loyal to my husband."

Isabelle's claim of loyalty to her husband applies not only to René's business dealings but is also meant to dissuade Stephen's advances. Isabelle is attempting to tell Stephen to stop pursuing her, yet just like Bérard and René, when she speaks Stephen doesn't listen. Instead, Stephen does exactly as he wants without regard for Isabelle's wishes.

Madame Azaire was born Isabelle Fourmentier, the youngest of five girls to a family in the city of Rouen. Isabelle's parents are indifferent and neglectful, and her father is disappointed that she was not born a boy. Her eldest sister, Mathilde, is temperamental and sullen, and the next two eldest, Béatrice and Delphine, have formed an exclusive alliance. The second to youngest Fourmentier, Jeanne, while only two years older than Isabelle, is her only family support, and the person she loves most in the world.

The narrative shifts here to give a summary of Isabelle's previous life, and it's clear that her oppression as a woman began very early for her. Her own father only values sons, and when he doesn't have any, he is very resentful of his daughters. This causes the girls to rely only on each other, and it deepens their love and relationships. Birdsong *highlights many forms of love, and Jeanne and Isabelle's deep love for one another as sisters is a prime example of this.*

Years earlier, at her sister Béatrice's wedding, Isabelle had met an infantry officer named Jean Destournel. Jean courted Isabelle for a year, but her father intervened, telling Jean he was "too undistinguished" to marry his daughter. Jean wasn't sure he even wanted to marry Isabelle, but he was nevertheless intimidated by her father, and he quickly ended their relationship.

This passage illustrates Isabelle's father's control over her life. As a woman, she is not allowed to choose her own suitors, and she is not free to follow her heart. Instead, these basic choices are made by her father.

Isabelle was heartbroken after Jean left her, but over the next three years she grew into a "strong-willed" woman with "certain taste" and "assurance of opinions." Isabelle's father tired of her independence, and when he heard of the death of René Azaire's wife, he quickly arranged their marriage. René promised Isabelle some independence once they were married, and she agreed, eager to leave her father's home.

Isabelle's desire for independence is fueled by her oppression. Of course, this behavior directly leads to her marriage to René. By daring to form her own tastes and opinions, Isabelle's father views her as a threat to the balance of power, and he quickly moves to stifle this independence.

Isabelle has had little problem transitioning to become Madame Azaire. She is fond of Lisette and Grégoire, and she is an "affectionate and dutiful wife to her husband." She doesn't love René and he knows it, but he views love as "unnecessary emotion."

Despite her resistance to the patriarchy, Isabelle still surrenders to social norms and tries to be a good wife. Unlike Stephen, she views Lisette and Grégoire as her responsibility to nurture and care for.

René believes children are "important proof of his standing in society," and Isabelle agrees to have more. René approaches sex with his wife in a "businesslike and predatory manner," and she submits to him, not quite understanding his cold approach and refusal to talk about the act.

To René, children are evidence of masculinity and power, and his inability to father more children with Isabelle threatens his status. Love is a needless emotion according to René, and sex is merely for procreation, nothing more.

When Isabelle does not become pregnant, René blames himself, and his frustration affects his ability to perform sexually. He begins to ignore Isabelle, and she becomes frightened of him. Now, at twenty-nine years old, Isabelle looks at the visiting young Stephen as a sort of "third child," although she admits that even this awakens a "motherly tenderness" in her.

As René's masculinity and power begins to slip in the form of his impotence, he attempts to replace this power with fear. Isabelle's motherly feelings toward Stephen reflect her place within society—it is her job to care for and nurture children and men.

Early one morning, Stephen rises early. The Azaires are planning a day on the water gardens with Bérard and his wife, and they have invited him to join. Lisette appears especially excited by this, and they make their way down to the waterway to board Bérard's flat-bottomed boat. He directs each of them to a seat on the boat, and Stephen is seated directly across from Isabelle.

Lisette's excitement over Stephen's agreement to join their daytrip is evidence of her sexual attraction to him. As Lisette is sixteen and Stephen is twenty, she is a more suitable match for him, and this this makes his love for Isabelle all the more forbidden.

Cramped in the small and uncomfortable boat, there is no breeze and it is exceedingly warm. The water is stagnant, and Stephen tries to situate his feet so that he does not touch Isabelle across from him. He notes her attractive ankles and calves as he positions himself.

The stagnant and decaying water of the Somme is a precursor to the death that will consume the river during the war. Stephen and Isabelle's efforts to avoid touching each other not only fuel their forbidden attraction but also highlight the lengths that they must go to observe the rules of society; as a married woman, Isabelle must not touch another man, even out of necessity.

Bérard captains the boat, talking excessively about the area and who lives where, referring to the dank riverbed as beautiful. Stephen tries to catch Isabelle's eye, but she avoids his gaze. Exhausted in the heat, Bérard allows René to captain the boat and they soon stop for lunch.

The riverbed is not beautiful, but since Bérard insists that it is, no one disagrees. This is a reflection of Bérard's power as a man in society; what he professes as truth is an outright falsehood, yet he has the power to impose his own reality.

On shore, no one is particularly hungry, and as René smokes and Bérard naps, Stephen carves a small figure out of wood. Lisette asks him what he is carving, and he gives her the small figure as a gift. Stephen begins a new carving, intending to give it to Grégoire, and they soon get back on the boat.

Lisette views the offhanded way in which Stephen gifts her the carving as an affirmation of his romantic feelings for her. Of course, the fact that Stephen immediately begins to carve one for Grégoire suggests otherwise, but she fails to notice this, and it fuels her desire for him.

Stephen is disgusted by the water; rats swim by and the entire area seems to be in a state of decay. Isabelle too is miserable, and she loosens the neck of her dress in the unbearable heat. She is suddenly less concerned over the placement of her feet, and her leg rests firmly against Stephen's.

Again, the decay of the river and the presence of rats in the water foreshadows the state of the river and surrounding areas during the war. Isabelle seems to suddenly give in to her repressed desires, if only for a moment.

As their trip comes to a close, René begins to remark on how wonderful the day has been and how beautiful the river is. Isabelle becomes suddenly aware of the placement of her leg and sits upright, rigidly.

Of course, the day has not been wonderful. The water is disgusting, and the weather is unbearably hot, but since René declares it otherwise, so it is. This is another reflection of René's power within society.

Back in his room, Stephen takes a cool bath and sits down with a deck of cards. He begins to move the cards about in a sequence taught to him by a friend of his grandfather who made his living telling fortunes at fairs. He files the cards into two piles, telling himself that if the queen of diamonds appears in the left pile before the jack of clubs lands on the right, Isabelle will be his. He smiles to himself, recognizing the ridiculousness of his game.

Stephen knows that his superstitious game is nonsense, but he continues to play it. Stephen's life has always been painful and out of his control—first as an orphan and now as he finds himself in love with another man's wife—and he is in search of something to sustain him, even if it is "ridiculous."

Stephen soon falls asleep to the sounds of **birds** outside and dreams the reoccurring dream that has plagued him for most of his life. In his dream, a bird is trapped in a window and he tries to free it, when suddenly the entire room is full of birds, all flapping their wings and attempting to peck at his face.

The birds, again indifferent to Stephen, are symbolic of nature and also of optimism. Stephen's dream of the birds pecking at his face is a reflection of his pessimism and fear of life and love.

The next day, a telegram arrives from London requesting that Stephen conclude his work and get back. He responds, asking for an additional month to complete his work, and panics at the idea of leaving before "resolving the conflicting passions that are threatening to overpower him."

Faulks's use of the word "conflicting" suggests that Stephen knows his relationship with Isabelle is wrong; however, he is driven by his love (even though he is frightened by it) and wants to see where it leads.

The threat that the other textile workers will strike with the dyers heats up, and the following day at the factory, Meyraux speaks to the employees as a group. He says that while he hopes one body will one day represent all workers, right now is a poor time for a strike. Foreign competitors are threatening their business, and he urges them to stay and work.

Meyraux alone is responsible for keeping René's employees pacified and working. René offers very little incentive and he is not willing to budge, which is again evidence of his cruelty and greed.

Suddenly, several protestors supporting the dyers burst into the factory, followed by Lucien Lebrun and the police. Lucien addresses the crowd from Meyraux's place at the head and encourages all the workers to stick together against unfair wages and poor working conditions. "We must think of our wives and children," Lucien cries.

Lucien attempts to rally the workers by appealing to their love for their wives and families. Of course, he is unsuccessful.

An unknown man yells from the crowd, "Talking of wives, we all know what they say about you, young man!" Another man loudly protests about the "spy from England" listening in on their meetings. Ignoring the building violence, Stephen asks a worker next to him what was meant by the man's wife comment. The worker informs him that "Lucien and the boss's wife [Isabelle] are very good friends."

Stephen is distracted by the thought of Isabelle having an affair with Lucien and fails to see that his own presence is fueling the mob. He is blinded by his love for Isabelle (and his obvious jealousy) and he narrowly escapes serious injury.


A brawl breaks out in the factory and Stephen is punched in the face by an unseen assailant. He punches back, hitting another man in the face, as the women workers and police usher the dyers and protestors out of the factory. The police "randomly arrest two of the most disreputable-looking" men, and the factory goes back to work.

Ironically, it is the women who largely break-up the brawl, and this serves to further disrupt popular stereotypes of gender. Society has deemed women weak and dependent upon men, yet they completely control this very dangerous situation.

Later in his room, as Stephen's hand begins to swell, he realizes that he has fallen in love with Isabelle. At dinner, René comments on the disruption at the factory and Stephen tells him he thinks it best if he stays away for a few days to allow everyone to cool down.

To Stephen, the growing dissent at the factory is the perfect excuse for him to stay at home during the day with Isabelle as René is busy at the factory.

The next day after René departs for the factory, Stephen feels like a child home sick from school who is "eavesdropping on this female life." Isabelle directs the maids and the cook, and she receives a delivery from the butcher boy.

Stephen feels like an intruder in Isabelle's "female life," and this too is a reflection of a sexist society. Isabelle's domestic duties are seen as trivial and wholly foreign to "men's work."

Isabelle asks Stephen if he will be taking lunch with her and Lisette, as Grégoire is still in school. He agrees, and the three enjoy an informal meal with plenty of wine. In response to a question about his parents, Stephen tells the women that he was an orphan, raised by grandparents and then in "an institution." He says that he will be returning to England soon, and "the atmosphere becomes thick." Lisette excuses herself for a walk in the garden and perhaps a nap, and Stephen is left alone with Isabelle.

Grégoire is at school while Lisette stays at home because a formal education is only valued in the lives of men and boys. Lisette, on the other hand, can learn all she needs to know about domestic life from Isabelle, and as such, she does not attend school.

With Lisette gone, Stephen grabs Isabelle's arm, and when she protests, he kisses her. He confesses his love for her and kisses her again, and she does not this time resist. Suddenly, she pulls away and runs from the room. She leaves him standing alone and goes to her room, where she paces and cries, "choking with passion for him." Isabelle returns to the dining room, where Stephen still stands, and tells him, "Come to **the red room**."

Again, Stephen does not respect Isabelle's objections, and this is evidence of her powerlessness. Of course, she is also powerless against her own growing feelings for Stephen, which are rooted in "passion," not love. Isabelle is unable to contain her desire for Stephen, and this runs counter to society's expectations of her to be chaste and demure.

Isabelle quickly turns and leaves, and Stephen is afraid he won't find the right room in the massive house. Near a locked door that leads to the servants' quarters, Stephen finds Isabelle in a room with a brass bed and a red cover. "Isabelle," he says for the first time.

Stephen can barely find the dining room each night for dinner, and he is constantly getting lost in the house. Ironically, he quickly locates the red room—evidence of his love and desire for Isabelle.

Stephen begins to tear Isabelle's clothes from her body, and "the more she imagines the degradation of her false modesty the more she feels excited." She begins to beg Stephen to take her, and she helps him remove the rest of her clothes. He pushes her to the bed and performs oral sex on her, something she has never experienced before. Isabelle continues to beg him, and then they have sex.

Again, Isabelle's uncontrollable desire for Stephen is completely at odds with how society expects her to behave. The sexist society Isabelle lives in demands that she be pure and show sexual restraint; Isabelle is unable to do this, and as such, she disrupts popular gender stereotypes and expectations.

Afterward, filled with "desire and happiness," Stephen and Isabelle remain silently side-by-side on the bed, listening to the sounds of **birds** in the garden outside. Stephen tells Isabelle that he doesn't have the strength to watch her about the house, living as René's wife. "I shall give myself away," he says. "You won't," says Isabelle. "And nor shall I. You will be strong because you love me."

The birds are again indifferent to Stephen and Isabelle. Interestingly, Isabelle claims that Stephen will find strength in his love for her, not in her love for him, which suggests that Stephen's love for Isabelle is not completely reciprocated. Isabelle is passionate about Stephen and he satisfies her sexual desires, yet she does not love him in the same way, or to the same extent, that he loves her.

Later, when René returns home from the factory, he is in a surprisingly good mood. The dyers' strike does not appear to be spreading to his workers, and Bérard and his wife are planning a visit after dinner. René asks Isabelle how her day was, and she tells him that she spent some time reading. René then asks Lisette about her day, and she reports falling asleep in the garden and having a "very strange dream." When her father asks what the dream was about, she giggles and says, "I'm not telling you."

Obviously, Lisette is aware of Stephen and Isabelle's affair. The way she giggles when René asks her about her dream is indicative of her embarrassment over what she has heard. Furthermore, her eavesdropping on her stepmother and her lover has awakened Lisette's own sexual desires, and she is not eager to talk to her father about them.

Stephen arrives at the dining room door for dinner, and he briefly acknowledges René and Isabelle before quickly sitting in a chair. Stephen ignores Isabelle throughout dinner, engaging René instead about a fishing trip he has planned later in the week with Bérard. As the men converse, Isabelle escapes to her own thoughts.

Again, Stephen's behavior is a form of self-preservation. If he doesn't acknowledge Isabelle and their adulterous afternoon, then it didn't happen—at least not in the presence of René and the Bérards.

Isabelle wonders how long she will be able to "maintain the falsity of her position," and thinks about her afternoon spent with Stephen. She left **the red room** at five o'clock, and she has not spoken to him since.

Isabelle's "falsity of position" is not just her position as René's wife or Stephen's lover. Her true sexual nature has been awakened with her affair, and she will not be able to ignore it in the future.


After their time together, Isabelle still must tend to the "practical matters" of their affair. She has to launder the bedding and most of her underclothes; evidence of their love is all over. Isabelle manages time to bathe and wash the traces of Stephen from her skin and body, then she scours the tub and stops to "check and recheck **the room** for signs of adultery."

This passage is again reflective of the sexist nature of society. After their affair, Stephen simply goes about his business, but Isabelle is left with all the work. She alone must cover-up their affair and bears the burden of responsibility.

Isabelle doesn't have the time or the privacy to wash the red bedcover without drawing attention, and she plans instead to throw it away—René will find nothing suspicious about a new bedcover. Isabelle feels "no revulsion for the stains and physical reminders of their afternoon," instead seeing the marks as "the witness of an intimacy that pressed her heart." Her sister, Jeanne, has taught her not to be ashamed of such things.

The nature of the society in which Isabelle and Jeanne have grown up demands that they be ashamed of their sexuality; however, Jeanne and Isabelle refuse to follow this rule. Their sexuality is the very thing that gives and sustains life, and they will not be ashamed. In this way, both Jeanne and Isabelle challenge the patriarchy.

Bérard and his wife arrive for a visit, and they all stand to move to another room for cards and drinks. As Isabelle stands, she is suddenly aware of Stephen's eyes on her body. She feels naked and is suddenly "overpowered" by her "shame and guilt." She begins to markedly blush, and René asks if she is feeling well. Isabelle insists that she is simply warm and excuses herself. Bérard and René exchange a glance; "Circulation problems," Bérard says.

Bérard's diagnosis of "circulation problems" hints at menstruation and women's problems, which neither René nor Bérard take seriously. As such, they do not take Isabelle seriously either. Ironically, Isabelle is not ashamed of her affair until she is in René's presence. This is reflective of his control over her.

Alone in her room, Isabelle hears a soft knock on her door. Stephen appears, having come to check that she is alright. He kisses her quickly and returns downstairs to René, Bérard, and their card game.

Unlike René, Stephen truly loves Isabelle and cares about her well-being, and so he is the only one to check on her in her room.

The next day, Stephen takes a walk into town. René has told him not to return to the factory for a few more days, and he cannot bear to be around Isabelle without sharing parts of himself. With Isabelle, Stephen feels "an impulse to disclose" his life, and while this doesn't frighten him, he "does not feel pleasure at the prospect of [talking about his past]."

Again, Stephen's love for Isabelle is not merely physical. He wants to share his life with her, even though his life is full of heartache and pain, which makes Isabelle's ultimate rejection of Stephen all the more painful.

Stephen enters a cathedral, and kneeling in a pew, he prays "instinctively, without knowing what he did." He asks God to save him and Isabelle.

Stephen knows that his affair with Isabelle is wrong on many levels, and he is compelled to ask God for forgiveness.

When Stephen returns to the mansion, he finds Isabelle reading in a small study. As she stands to greet him, he begins to kiss her, running his hands all over her body. He pins her to the wall and reaches under her dress, pulling at her clothing. "We must stop," he says. They agree to meet in **the red room**, but neither of them move to separate. "Come to me," Isabelle whispers. "Into me, now."

Isabelle is excited by the prospect of getting caught. Stephen stops and suggests they go to the red room for more privacy, but she is determined to have him right there in the main study of the house. Again, this is the opposite of how Isabelle is expected to behave.

They have sex right there in the study, fully clothed and standing against the wall. "I love you," Isabelle tells Stephen as she pulls away from him and runs her hands up and down his body. As Stephen begins to orgasm, Isabelle takes the last "three or four spasms in her mouth." She does so "instinctually," "almost from a sense of tidiness, not because it was something she had known about or done before."

Interestingly, Isabelle professes her love to Stephen during sex, which suggests a deeper love for the act itself than for Stephen. Her "instinct" to clean up, even during their lovemaking, is reflective of the domestic responsibilities expected of her. Additionally, this instinctual knowledge of oral sex implies that it is a natural act and nothing to be ashamed of, rather than evidence of any depravity on Isabelle's behalf, as society would have her believe.

"**The red room**," Isabelle says, standing up. "In ten minutes." She turns to leave, and Stephen kills time cleaning the floor and takes a short walk in the garden. He remembers the exact way to the room, and finds Isabelle waiting for him there, dressed only in a robe. She takes charge, undressing Stephen slowly, and the two spend the rest of the afternoon making love.

Isabelle again challenges popular female stereotypes by taking control of her lovemaking with Stephen. Typically, society views the man as in charge in all areas, especially those concerning sex, but Isabelle is empowered to take control, upsetting traditional notions of femininity.

After they wake, Stephen again asks Isabelle about the night he heard sounds from her bedroom. Isabelle tells Stephen that René "becomes frustrated" with her. After she failed to become pregnant, René assumed that there was nothing wrong with him since he has already fathered two children, but now he is "not so sure." He resents Isabelle for being young and claims that she "castrated him." Now, he tries to become "excited" by "doing strange things."

René's abusive treatment is a display of his sexist beliefs and misogyny. He resents Isabelle's youth and her ability to mother children, and he views his impotence (and her fertility) as a threat to his power and masculinity. René attempts to right this power imbalance with physical abuse, and this replaces a sexual release within his relationship with Isabelle.

Isabelle tells Stephen that René hits her, and while it is not terribly painful, she finds his strange sexual acts "humiliating." She claims that they haven't had actual intercourse for over a year, and they "both know he only comes to hit her now," but they "pretend." As Isabelle and Stephen talk, neither feels guilty about their affair, and **doves** sing in the garden below.

Again, the doves represent nature's indifference to human unhappiness. Isabelle feels responsible in her failing and abusive relationship, yet she is powerless to change it within the confines of her sexist society. Isabelle's affair with Stephen is the only way she is able to resist René's abuse.

Meanwhile, René has no reason to suspect Isabelle and Stephen's affair. He is not threatened by Stephen, and he is not in love with his wife either. Mostly, René feels guilty for marrying Isabelle and stealing her youth, and while his wife was initially receptive towards him, his neglect has turned her sour. René had "awakened her emotional and physical appetites," but had left her long ago for "a long, unnecessary battle with his own shortcomings."

René is not threatened by Stephen, but he is threatened by his wife's sexuality. It is clear to René that his wife is a passionate and sensual woman, but he is unable to give her what she needs, and this directly contributes to his impotence. René's guilt is a hint at his hidden conscience, yet he fails to fully acknowledge this in his desperate need to prove his masculinity.

On the weekend, Stephen agrees to go on the fishing trip to the Ancre River with the Azaires. Bérard is unable to come along after all, and Stephen boards the trolley with the family and heads to the countryside. They take a second train from Albert to Beaumont and arrive on the water. After an unsuccessful morning fishing, they all travel into the village of Auchonvillers to a small café Bérard has recommended for lunch.

The city of Albert and the village of Auchonvillers will become important locations during the upcoming war. A bloody battle will take place in the fields surrounding the area, and Stephen will nearly die here. Furthermore, Albert is the future home to the World War I monument Stephen's granddaughter, Elizabeth, visits on her journey to understand her grandfather.

At the small café, Stephen and the Azaires eat unappealing fish and drink wine. Sitting across from Isabelle, Stephen knows he will never return to London. He feels too strongly for Isabelle, but in addition to his tender feelings, he has "an overpowering sense of curiosity" to see where their relationship will go.

Through Stephen's decision not to return to England, Faulks argues the motivational power of love. Stephen is willing to sacrifice his career in order to pursue his relationship with Isabelle.

After lunch, they return to the river, and Stephen finds a secluded tree to rest under. Suddenly, a hand grabs his shoulder, and he turns to finds Lisette standing beside him.

Of course, Stephen assumes that only Isabelle would approach him. Society, and Stephen, expects Lisette to be chaste and innocent.

"You expected it to be someone else, didn't you?" Lisette asks, before promptly informing Stephen that she knows all about him and her step-mother. She had heard them that first day in the garden from an open window, and she had also heard Stephen sneak into Isabelle's room later that night to check on her.

Like Isabelle, Lisette is behaving in a way that is unexpected because of her gender. Society expects Lisette to be pure and unaware of sex.

Lisette tells Stephen that he "shouldn't have led her on" by giving her the wood carving, and she tells him that her body is not the body of a child. "Touch me, then, touch me as you touch her." He refuses, but Lisette grabs his hand and places it between her breasts, and Stephen feels "the reflex of desire."

Stephen shows restraint with Lisette, and this is reflective of his love for Isabelle. Clearly, Stephen is attracted to Lisette, and she is certainly open to him, but he ignores his "reflex of desire."

Stephen tries to placate Lisette with a kiss, but she declines, instead placing his hand under her skirt. Stephen becomes slightly aroused and doesn't immediately pull his hand away. When he does, he grabs Lisette's arm and tells her to never again behave this way. She stiffens under his touch. "I promise," she says. "I want to go home now."

Although Stephen begins to falter and succumb to desire, he ultimately chooses his love for Isabelle over sex with Lisette. However, Stephen also assumes power over Lisette and tells her exactly how she will behave in the future, and she is clearly frightened of him and his abuse of power.

One day while in **the red room**, Stephen tells Isabelle about Lisette's advances. Isabelle asks him if he thinks Lisette is ready to make love to a man. He answers yes, but reassures her that he is not interested. Isabelle is less concerned about Stephen's potential feelings for Lisette and is more worried that this difficult time in her young life means that Isabelle has "a duty to stay and look after her," instead of running away with Stephen.

Isabelle is not initially concerned with Stephen's potential feelings for Lisette because Isabelle is more worried about Lisette's feelings than Stephen's. This is reflective of Isabelle's sense of responsibility toward her stepchildren, which outweighs any romantic feelings that she has for Stephen. This also evidence that Isabelle's feelings for Stephen are rooted in passion, not love.

Stephen reminds Isabelle that Lisette and Grégoire are not her children, and he informs her that he is supposed to return to London next week. He suggests they go to a remote place in England, and Isabelle suggests that he stay in France and work locally. "Not that, Isabelle. You know that won't work." As he begins to seduce her again, Isabelle agrees to run away with him.

Isabelle could be happy running around with Stephen behind René's back, as she could still fulfill her duty to the children but also satisfy her sexual desires. As Stephen's feelings are more deeply rooted in love for Isabelle, this is not an option for him. Stephen must have Isabelle all to himself or not at all.

Later René tells Stephen and Isabelle that he heard a "strange story" about someone visiting Lucien during the strike and delivering food. Stephen says that he heard of many men bringing food to the dyers' families, but René says this was a woman.

René considers this a "strange story" because he too believes that a woman cannot have a relationship with a man that does not involve sex.

Isabelle confesses suddenly. "I don't think it's strange. It was me." Isabelle tells René that the people were hungry and she fed them. She would do it again, she says, and René becomes angry, telling her that he has heard "another piece of tittle-tattle." According to rumor, the woman was also "enjoying some liaison with Lebrun." Isabelle denies the affair, claiming, "Not with Lucien. With Stephen."

Isabelle considers her relationship with Lucien and her attempts to aid the striking workers' families to be her Christian duty. Isabelle is kind and moral, yet rumor and popular assumptions have branded her otherwise because of her gender.

Isabelle apologizes to René, claiming it was not done to hurt him. René demands to know where in the house the affair took place and wonders what her father will think. "Bitch," he says. "Your father told me and I never listened."

This is further evidence of René's misogyny. He uses derogatory language and is abusive towards Isabelle, and insists on knowing where the affair took place because it threatens his own masculinity.

"What can you expect from a woman you have treated as you have treated Isabelle?" Stephen asks. René, clearly embarrassed that Stephen knows his secret impotence, kicks him out of the house. "I will leave your house," he says, "and I am taking your wife with me."

René is more bothered that Stephen knows his secret than he is about the actual affair. For René, having another man aware of his deficient masculinity is worse than potentially losing his wife to another man.

"I don't want this," Isabelle claims. She states that she doesn't know how to behave now or whom to love. She doesn't fully trust Stephen's love either, she says. "How do I know that you love me, Stephen? How can I tell?" Turning to René, Isabelle asks, "Why should I trust you when you have given me so little reason to even like you?"

This is further proof that Isabelle does not love Stephen in quite the same way that he loves her. Isabelle is more driven by her dislike for René than she is by her love for Stephen. The fact that she doesn't know whom to love suggests that she could equally love either man—or neither one, for that matter.

Isabelle tells René that she is going to her room to pack, and as she leaves the room he yells, "You go with him and you are going to hell!"

René's outburst directly appeals to Isabelle's morality and her sense of guilt, and this fuels Isabelle's subsequent shame of her affair with Stephen.


Isabelle packs a few dresses and her framed pictures of her family and meets Stephen in the foyer. She can't bring herself to say good-bye to the children, and as Isabelle and Stephen walk out the door, both Lisette and Grégoire watch from the stairs.

Isabelle feels guilty that she abandons the children for Stephen. After all, society has deemed them her responsibility and she is turning her back on them. Interestingly, she later neglects saying good-bye to Stephen when she leaves him as well, and this too is a reflection of her guilt over her life choices.

The children stand terrified as René goes from room to room, tearing apart beds and searching for evidence of Isabelle and Stephen's affair. He goes through every room in the house before giving up, forgetting about **the red room**.

The red room is symbolic of Isabelle's passion and sexuality. Ironically, just as René is unable to satisfy his wife sexually, he is not able to find the red room.

Stephen and Isabelle board a train and end up in the spa town of Plombières. Finally alone together, Isabelle asks Stephen about his childhood. Stephen tells her that his father abandoned his mother once she became pregnant, and after he was born, he went to live with his grandparents. Stephen's mother ran away with another man, and after his grandfather was sent to prison "on some small charge," he was sent to an institution.

Stephen's history is an important factor in Isabelle's later decision to leave him. Since he did not have a traditional childhood or parents who loved him unconditionally, Isabelle assumes that Stephen will not understand the deep love that she develops for their unborn child.

Stephen tells Isabelle that a social reformer named Vaughan showed an interest in him and became his guardian. He funded his education, and Stephen says, "That's it." "That's all?" Isabelle asks. "That's all your life?"

Isabelle thinks that Stephen's life is lacking, particularly in love, and this passage reflects this opinion. Again, this in large part is why Isabelle ultimately decides to leave Stephen.

Stephen and Isabelle arrive in St.-Rémy-de-Provence, near Isabelle's cousin, and Jeanne wires them money to secure an apartment. Stephen takes a job as an assistant to a furniture maker, and Isabelle tends to their home.

Stephen and Isabelle settle into their respective gender roles; however, Stephen is highly educated, and he accepts a job that is below his station so that Isabelle can be near her family. This is a reflection of Stephen's love for Isabelle and the sacrifices he is willing to make for her happiness.

Their life together is quiet but comfortable, and Isabelle doesn't miss her life with René. They spend most of their time together, even in sleep, but Stephen finds that "the closeness of Isabelle's unconscious body makes him feel uneasy." Stephen spends many nights on the couch, staring thoughtlessly at the ceiling.

Stephen is "uneasy" next to Isabelle because he senses that she does not love him as much as he loves her. Deep down, Stephen knows that his heart is not safe with Isabelle, and he is unable to sleep next to her because of this.

After two months, Isabelle has settled comfortably into her new life when she misses her menstrual cycle. Isabelle notes that "she had stopped hemorrhaging herself away; her power was turned inward where it would silently create." She mentions nothing to Stephen.

Isabelle is empowered by her sexuality, and she is likewise empowered by her ability to create human life. She considers this power uniquely her own, and she is not willing to share it with Stephen.

On day while walking in town with Stephen, Isabelle becomes faint and must sit down. Stephen begins to fuss over her, and she nearly tells him that she is pregnant—yet something stops her. She wishes she could just present Stephen with the child. To Isabelle, her pregnancy is nobody else's business, "even the man who had caused [it]."

Isabelle's sexist society views a woman's reproductive system and menstrual cycle as something unclean and shameful, and since her child is a direct result of this, she keeps it a secret—even from Stephen. She wishes to present the child to him only after it is born, and skip the messy birth.

Isabelle is convinced that Stephen won't understand her connection to her unborn baby. She imagines it is a boy, and the baby satisfies a deep need that she didn't realize she had; "it was as though she had become conscious of a starving hunger only after having eaten." Isabelle's feelings for her baby make her nostalgic for her own family, or at least for Jeanne, and she begins to feel guilty for what she has done. She has already confessed her sin to the local priest, but his penance is "unsatisfying."

Isabelle's assumption that her unborn child is a boy mirrors her father's own preference for a male child. Even though Isabelle is a woman and resents society's unfair treatment of her, she is subconsciously affected by its message of male superiority. Isabelle's attempts to confess her sins is reflective of René's outburst damning her to hell. She is attempting to save her soul, yet is also "unsatisfied" by her penance because she doesn't truly believe that she has sinned by indulging her natural sexual desires.

Now, in the street with Stephen, Isabelle cannot bring herself to tell him her secret. He offers her a piece of cake in case she hasn't been eating well, and a large **pigeon** descends on them, looking for a stray piece of cake.

Again, Stephen's fear of birds reflects his own pessimism and fear of life. Birds metaphorically represent life and optimism within the novel, and they serve as a sort of kryptonite to Stephen.

"Jesus Christ!" Stephen yells in response to the **bird**. Isabelle can't understand. "It's only a pigeon," she says. She swats the bird away and turns to Stephen. "I've always hated birds," he says. He tells Isabelle about a bad experience with a dead crow at the institution as a child, and she assumes that birds remind him of his awful childhood. Stephen claims it is only partly that. "I've always hated them, from long before that. There's something cruel, prehistoric about them."

Stephen views the birds as cruel because he subconsciously views life as cruel. His own parents did not love him as they should have, and he senses that Isabelle's love is not strong either. Birds remind Stephen of what he is lacking in his life, and because of this, he hates them.

The next week, Isabelle feels a sharp pain in her stomach and goes to visit a doctor. He gives her a test and promises results in a week. She goes back to the church but not to confess. Ashamed, she looks up at the crucifix.

While Isabelle is ashamed of the choices she has made (mainly abandoning Lisette and Grégoire), she is not ashamed of her pregnancy (or the act that created it) and she refuses to confess.

Later, Isabelle writes a letter to Jeanne. She tells her of her pregnancy and her hesitancy to tell Stephen. The doctor has said that her pain is normal and that she need only rest. Isabelle tells Jeanne that she fears she has "gone too far" in her relationship with Stephen, and while she is lost, she thinks that she "can find her way home if she goes now."

Isabelle has "gone too far" in her relationship with Stephen because she doesn't truly love him in the way that he loves her. Isabelle knows that she will eventually go back to Lisette and Grégoire and break Stephen's heart, and she feels guilty about this deception.

Meanwhile, Stephen thinks of his grandfather's cottage and considers taking Isabelle there. He does not feel sentimental for the cottage or his grandfather, but he wants to see Isabelle in the place of his past, "so that the ages of his life will be united."

Isabelle assumes that Stephen's past means he is incapable of love; however, Stephen's intention to "unite" his love for Isabelle with his loveless past suggests otherwise.

When Stephen returns home, he finds Isabelle and most of her personal belongings gone. Many of her dresses still hang in the closet, and he holds one "against his face, then crushes it in his arms." The next day he goes to work and comes home and makes himself dinner. He sits alone each night thereafter, drinking wine and thinking about nothing. Stephen feels "himself grow cold."

Stephen has been betrayed by love. The coldness he feels is his soul being taken over by the hate that will largely sustain him throughout the war. Still, Stephen remains in the apartment and waits for Isabelle to return, and this is evidence of his enduring love for her.

PART TWO: FRANCE 1916

Englishman Jack Firebrace is digging forty-five feet below the French soil, excavating the trenches of World War I with Evans, a fellow miner. The men are attempting to brace the tunnels for the infantry soldiers, and Jack and Evans have lost track of how long they have been underground; however, the fighting is so intense aboveground that they don't mind.

The fact that Jack and Evans would rather work endless hours forty-five feet beneath the ground than be on the surface is a testament to the horrors of war. Underground work is terrifying and dangerous—and the mines are notoriously full of deadly toxic gas—yet it is still safer than being exposed to the fighting.

Evans tells Jack to back out of the hole he is chipping away at. Turner, another miner, has heard enemy sounds further back and Captain Weir, the miners' commanding officer, has called on Jack's impeccable hearing to identify the noise—he is adept at discerning normal shellfire from enemy digging near their trenches.

This passage illustrates how the deck is stacked against the soldiers. Their safety relies on Jack's hearing and his ability to discern threatening noises. Of course, this is insufficient, and several men are killed.

Turner claims that the sounds seem to be German digging, and Jack asks Weir to turn off the air-feed so that he can listen more closely. Jack determines the sounds to be surface shellfire and nothing to worry about. He is "as sure as he can be," and Evans and Jack quickly return to their own digging.

Jack can't be sure that the Germans are not planting explosives near their tunnels. Listening posts in the trenches consist only of men with stethoscopes, and are nowhere near accurate.

Evans tries to light a candle, but there is not enough oxygen. The two men finish their shift of digging, and as Evans helps Jack out of his hole, a sudden blast rocks the earth and collapses much of their tunnel. As Jack, Evans, and Weir are blown to the sides of the tunnel, broken and destroyed bodies are thrown through the center of the remaining shaft, including a portion of Turner's face and skull. The three men quickly exit the tunnel before the rest of it collapses.

This passage is exceedingly violent. Birdsong *is a realistic depiction of the horrors of war, and Faulks explicitly describes the blood and carnage involved in the blast. Broader history tends to glorify war by ignoring or glossing over the human lives that are lost, but Faulks brings this loss of life to the forefront in order to highlight the true cost of war.*

Back on the surface, Jack receives a letter from his wife, Margaret, but he is unable to read it. It is difficult to think of home during the toil of the war, and Jack puts the letter away until he can better concentrate on it.

This reference to Jack's life before the war serves as a foil for the horrors of battle. The terrible state of the war is heightened in relation to Jack's life during peacetime.

Jack informs the other miners that Turner has been killed. Jack shares a small dugout with Bill Tyson and Arthur Shaw, and the muddy hole serves as their home during the fighting. They have been together for nearly a year, each enticed by the promise of the six shilling pay for experienced miners and the likelihood of a quick war. Jack has reluctantly surrendered to the men's friendship—with the rate at which the men die, Jack is weary of growing attached to anyone.

The calm way in which Jack informs the other miners of Turner's death is indicative of the death that they see on a daily basis. Death was seen at unprecedented levels during World War I; on average, 6,000 soldiers were killed daily for the duration of the war—over nine million men in total.

Weir approaches the men and orders Shaw and Tyson into the tunnel. Tyson had been previously ordered to sentry duty, but the platoon is short of men and Weir orders Jack to the post instead. Jack tries to sleep before his watch starts but the day's events keep him awake. He doesn't blame himself for misidentifying the sounds in the tunnel; he had done his best and explosions are common enough underground.

The fact that the platoon is short of soldiers is also a reflection of the high number of casualties. There are not enough men to fight the war, and at the rate that they are all dying, Jack is forced to pull double duty. Furthermore, Jack isn't a soldier. The men who dig the trenches are miners, and they lack the full military training of the soldiers.

Abandoning sleep, Jack reads the letter from Margaret and learns that his son, John, has fallen ill with diphtheria. Margaret was nearly forty when the boy was born, and he is physically frail and simple of mind. Jack rarely thinks of his family on the front, and their life in England feels a world away—even though gunfire can be heard in London if the conditions are right.

Jack's letter from Margaret establishes his deep love for his son, John. Jack finds strength in his love for John, and it helps him endure through the war. Jack may feel far away from his family, but the fact that they can hear the fighting in London implies not only the war's severity, but its closeness and danger to civilian life as well.

At his sentry post, Jack is exhausted and falls asleep without realizing it. Captain Weir walks by and discovers Jack's dereliction of duty. "It's a court-martial offence. See me tomorrow at six. Your sergeant will bring you. You know the punishment," Weir says.

A court martial is a judicial court used to try offenses against military law. Technically, Jack is not a soldier, yet he is still subject to military law.

After he is relieved by another miner, Jack sits quietly under a tree undamaged by shellfire. If he is found guilty by court-martial, it is possible he will be shot. The members of his own unit will line up with guns, some loaded with blanks, others not, and no one will know who actually fired the killing shot. Jack prays to God for his life and awaits to hear his fate.

The undamaged tree is another painful reminder of nature's indifference to the horrors of war and the actions of men. Jack may be killed for falling asleep (an act which seems counterproductive, since there are already not enough men), yet the tree grows, unaffected.

Soon, Jack's sergeant collects him to go before Lieutenant Wraysford, one of the "strangest officers" the sergeant has known. When Jack arrives in the muddy hole that serves as the Lieutenant's home, he finds Weir is already there.

Stephen is now a lieutenant in the war, and his failed love with Isabelle has resulted in a deep and widespread hatred. Stephen is standoffish to the men he fights alongside, so they think him "strange."

Lieutenant Wraysford declines to charge Jack and Weir doesn't see the point in any further action. Wraysford tells Jack that he would like to go down into the tunnels, and he agrees to take him. Jack suspects that the two men are drunk, and while he has come to think of Weir as dependable, he knows little about Wraysford. He decides he doesn't care; he is just happy that his life has been spared.

Both Stephen and Weir drink excessively during the war (as do other men) to ease the pain and cope with the daily horrors. During WWI, soldiers were issued approximately one pint of alcohol per day, and it was used as the initial treatment for shellshock.

Later, Jack and the other miners are finally relieved and allowed to march to a billet for rest. Jack is exhausted and the long march feels unbearable. He suffers under the weight of his pack and twice falls asleep. He notices green grass growing on the side of the road and flowers blooming in the trees.

This passage again highlights nature and its indifference to the suffering caused by the war. Grass and flowers grow as the men die, and nature seems to mock Jack as he struggles to stay awake during the march.

The miners arrive in a small French village and Weir negotiates with a local farmer to secure them a barn to sleep in. In the barn, Tyson finds a clean corner and invites Shaw and Jack to join him. While the men do grow tired of each other's habits, they are "familiar with them and fear worse."

This passage illustrates the miserable existence the men lead as soldiers. They must convince civilians to allow them a place to sleep, and even then they are given only a barn and hay. Despite fighting on behalf of the civilians, the soldiers are treated quite poorly by them.

Later in the day, Jack wakes and walks outside as an infantry battalion arrives in the village. Jack notes that none of the infantry men "would admit that what they saw and what they did was beyond the boundaries of human behavior." It is hard to believe that these same men are responsible for so much killing, and that likewise, so much killing has been done against them. Jack too joins "the unspoken conspiracy that all is well, that no natural order has been violated.

Jack believes that the war is a crime against nature and humanity. The war has long since crossed any line of what could be considered moral or humane, and there is no going back. Jack knows that the war is wrong, yet he does not protest. This mirrors Stephen's failure to protest René's abusive treatment of Isabelle, and in that same vein, Jack's silence also illustrates how power and rank are maintained during the war.

The company food wagon arrives to feed the men, and Jack is too ashamed to admit that the meager meals supplied on the front are better than what he can afford at home. Next, the men line up naked near the washerwoman to bathe, and Jack notices Shaw's "huge back" and muscular shoulders, along with the "dimple of the coccyx and the fatty swell of his hair-covered buttocks." The men are issued clean clothes, although even these are covered with "immovable lice."

Jack's thoughts about Shaw and his body are overtly sexual, and his description is intimate and vaguely feminine. This description of the two men during a bath challenges stereotypes about men and masculinity. Both men are obviously brave and masculine—they are fighting in a war after all—but they are also tender and vulnerable.

The night before they leave to go back to the trenches, the men gather for singing. Weir plays the piano and Jack tells jokes, and Weir finds it difficult to enjoy the men's company knowing that they are personally responsible for the deaths of hundreds of people. The men "know no shame," and they sing on into the night.

This passage illustrates the cruelty of war, and places the soldiers in the worst possible light. Many of the men, including Weir and Jack, do believe that the war is wrong; however, the alternative is death if they are caught shirking their duties.

Meanwhile, Stephen Wraysford's section of the trenches have been shelled off for three days. He is exhausted, but his body is compelled by "some nervous chemical supplied by unknown glands." Stephen is not a popular officer, and he doesn't believe that there is a purpose to the fighting, nor an end in sight. It is Stephen's education which has seen him through the ranks, and his own commanding officer, Captain Gray, constantly encourages him to become closer with the men.

The "nervous chemical" that compels Stephen to keep fighting for three days straight is hate. Isabelle has turned him cold, and he hates the Germans and even the men he commands. Stephen is good to his men—he fights alongside them and holds them as they die—but he doesn't love them, and the men know it. Gray is convinced they will all fight better, and win the war, if they love more.

Stephen has developed a close friendship with Weir, and because of this, he knows more about the miners than he does about his own men. His favorite soldiers, Reeves, Byrne, and Wilkinson are at their normal post, and just as Stephen approaches them, a young soldier named Tipper runs along the dugout.

Despite his general coldness and hatred, Stephen grows to love Weir, and they help each other endure the hardships of war. The intimacy and closeness of Stephen and Weir also challenges popular gender stereotypes, as well as highlighting the power of love even in the darkness of war.

Tipper screams as he runs, confused and lost, and the other men can "see the contortions of his facial muscles beneath the skin." Tipper screams for his home and for his mother, and Stephen orders Reeves to get him out of the dugout. Stephen is left shaken, thinking about how "unnatural" their existence is.

Tipper represents the horrors of shellshock, or post-traumatic stress disorder, and he illustrates the unimaginable trauma that the soldiers endure during times of war. Tipper should have been hospitalized long ago, be he continues to fight, further injuring himself.

Later, Weir arrives in Stephen's dugout. He has run out of whiskey and he knows that his friend will have some extra. Weir is constantly afraid; afraid of the war, of the killing, and of dying, and he asks Stephen to talk to him as a distraction. "Talk to me, Wraysford," he says. "Talk to me about anything you like."

Weir's fear also challenges typical assumptions about gender and masculinity. As a man, Weir is expected to be courageous, but he is constantly afraid.

Stephen agrees and begins talking. He tells Weir that if the people back home in England saw some of the things they have done, "they would not believe their eyes." Stephen sees the war as "an exploration of how far men can be degraded," and he believes that the war has "barely started."

Like Jack, Stephen too believes that the war is a crime against humanity and nature, and his choice of conversation highlights humankind's potential to commit unspeakable acts.

Weir is disturbed by Stephen's choice of topic and he quickly changes the subject. "I've never been with a woman," Weir says. At thirty-two years old, Stephen can hardly believe his ears.

Weir's confession that he is a virgin again disrupts society's basic assumptions about gender and sexuality. As a man, Weir is supposed to be experienced with women, yet he is afraid of them too.

Weir admits that he wants to know what sex is like but now it has "become such an issue." Stephen suggests a prostitute, but Weir isn't interested. He assumes Stephen has been with many women, but says that for him it's not that easy. Stephen corrects him, denying much experience, but admits to once being in love.

Stephen hasn't had much experience with women either. Of course, there was Isabelle, but he was in love with her, and to him, it was never about the sex—although it was largely about sex for Isabelle.

Weir engages the topic of love, and Stephen tells him about Isabelle. He says that after she left, he didn't pursue her. Instead, he "let her go." Weir asks him if he thinks of her often, and Stephen answers, "No. Never."

When Stephen lets Isabelle go, he finally respects her position as he said he would that day in the rose garden. He lets her go because he loves her, and he respects her decision—even if that decision is to leave him.

Their conversation turns to their men, and Stephen claims that his men don't respect him. "I'm irrelevant to them," Stephen says. "Sometimes I think that I despise them," he adds. Just then, another soldier appears and tells Stephen that he is needed in the trenches. There are multiple casualties, he says. "Reeves, Wilkinson, I think."

This is a further reflection of Stephen's hate. Stephen has felt irrelevant his entire life, first to his parents and then to Isabelle, and now he is irrelevant to his men. However, Stephen still risks his life to save theirs, and this speaks to his inherent goodness.

Weir and Stephen run out to the trenches and begin digging through blown rock and dirt, trying to exhume their men. They pull Reeves from the rubble, "his rib cage missing on one side," and nearby, they uncover Wilkinson, who had just been married. Another soldier, Douglas, has also been hurt, and while he is still alive, he is in bad shape.

This passage is another example of the extreme violence present in Birdsong. *Through this violence, Faulks argues that remembrance of the war must include the war's horrific aspects as well. This violence too is part of history, and it must be observed so that it might be avoided in the future.*

Stephen comforts Douglas, whose femur is protruding from his leg. He asks about Douglas's wife, and reminds him that he will see her again. He is covered in Douglas's blood, and as the soldier loses consciousness, another blast rockets Stephen against the side of the trench. When the dust settles, Stephen is unhurt, and he calls for his men to take away Douglas's body. "Get this man's blood off me," he yells to the other men in the trench.

Later in the novel, when Elizabeth asks if her grandfather was a good man and a good soldier, Brennan tells her about Stephen holding the dying Douglas. For Elizabeth, this story is confirmation that her grandfather was a good man, and Stephen's actions as Douglas dies illustrate the breadth of humankind's potential for both good and evil.

In the following days, Stephen's company is relieved for rest, and he is billeted in a doctor's home on the edge of the town of Béthune. The house boasts a formal, overgrown garden, and he reflects on the last few days. At one point, the gunfire quiets and a **blackbird** is heard singing. In the house, Stephen soon falls asleep.

The overgrown garden represents nature and its continued growth and life despite the war. The blackbird is also a sign of nature, and is symbolic of optimism in the face of constant death.

In the morning, Stephen thinks about breakfast and wonders if there will be meat. He thinks of Bérard and his theory that English people eat meat every day for breakfast, and the house on the boulevard du Cange feels a world away.

This passage serves to illustrate how trivial Bérard and René's opinions were. Now, surrounded by death and hunger, the ridiculousness of this conversation is clear.

He thinks of Isabelle, and while Stephen can still taste her flesh, he remembers little else about her. "What had gone completely was the memory of what made her human, her ways and her thoughts."

This passage highlights the effect of pain and trauma on memory. Between his broken heart and the stress of war, Stephen has forgotten about his own love for Isabelle.

Stephen had remained in St.-Rémy for an entire year after Isabelle left, in case she needed him, and when she never returned, he boarded a train for Paris. "The strain of his anguish lasted for another year, then went cold in him," and when the war broke out, Stephen was glad for the distraction.

This passage illustrates Stephen's deep love for Isabelle, and it also highlights his loneliness. Isabelle has Jeanne to temper the sting of her pain, but Stephen, an orphan, has no one to run to.

Stephen had considered joining the French army. After all, they would all be fighting the same enemy, but he felt a strange pull to fight alongside other Englishmen. He returned to London, and while he lacked the training to join immediately, the sergeant "turned a blind-eye" and Stephen found himself an instant soldier.

Like many during World War I, Stephen feels the pull of patriotism and nationalism. The war brought out a deep sense of pride throughout much of Great Britain, due in large part to widespread propaganda posters.

Stephen had assumed that the war would be "fought and concluded swiftly in a traditional way," but over a year later, he had grown "used to the sight and smell of torn human flesh." Since he couldn't protest, "he turned himself to killing."

Stephen has no idea what he is getting himself into. The scale of death and inhumanity during World War I was unprecedented. For the first time ever, military efforts targeted civilians, and in the end, over ten million civilians were killed. Officially, the death count of civilians outnumbered those of the military by some three hundred thousand.

Later that morning, Stephen meets with Captain Gray, an odd Scotsman who spends most of his time reading. He asks Stephen how his platoon is fairing, and he tells him of the widespread death. "Yes of course," Gray says, and then asks if he is getting along with the men. Stephen replies "yes," although he is not sure that they really respect him.

Gray receives the news about Stephen's platoon as commonplace, underscoring the extensive death during the war. Gray frequently reads psychological texts, and this helps him to understand his men.

Gray asks if the men obey Stephen, and when he answers in the affirmative, Gray questions, "do you think that's enough?" Stephen thinks so, but Gray insists that he make his men love him, so that they fight better. He then asks Stephen if he loves his men, and he replies, "No, I suppose not."

Gray's line of questioning emphasizes the power of love; if the men love Stephen, they will better endure the hardships of war. Jack Firebrace and his love for his son is apparent proof of Gray's theory.


Stephen claims not to look down on the men, but because he doesn't value his own life, he has "no sense of the scale of these sacrifices. I don't know what anything is worth," Stephen says. Gray reminds him that he could be a great soldier. "You aren't yet," he says, "but you could be."

Essentially, this is the same fear Isabelle had regarding Stephen and his past affecting his ability to love. Gray implies that great soldiers also have a great capacity for love.


Meanwhile, Jack Firebrace has applied for leave to visit his sick son, but Weir denies him and instead orders him to begin a new tunnel. This time Jack will dig at a depth of seventy feet, but the shaft will be only three feet wide. Even Jack is uncomfortable under these conditions, and he tries not to think about the earth above him. He doesn't "think of the roots of trees, stretching down through the soil."

Faulks's imagery of the tree roots reaching down to Jack is another reference to nature, and it also illustrates how far Jack has fallen from righteousness during the war. Faulks argues that nature is indifferent to humankind, but Jack is so deep underground that he is even beyond the reach of indifferent tree roots.

That afternoon, Weir goes to see Captain Gray and requests for increased defense underground. Weir's men are not soldiers, and he fears the enemy will dig through their tunnels from the other side of No Man's Land. Gray agrees and promises to put Wraysford in charge.

The men working underground do not adhere to the same requirements as the infantry soldiers. Historically, miners were often older than soldiers, at times as old as sixty, and Weir's men cannot be expected to fight with the same skill as the infantry soldiers.

Stephen later asks his men for volunteers. "We'll take a sewer rat to show us the way, but I need two others. We'll be in a fighting tunnel. We won't have to crawl." When no one steps up, Stephen randomly selects two men.

Stephen's reference to the miners as "sewer rats" underscores the hierarchy of the men within World War I. Miners were often treated as second-class citizens by the infantry soldiers, and since the miners were often paid more than the soldiers in an effort to lure them away from their jobs at home, there was hostility between them.

Jack meets them underground and leads the soldiers through the dark underworld of the war. "I've heard German movement coming this way. We need to protect our men laying the charge and also the lower tunnel," he tells them. The men in Stephen's charge are terrified of the deep tunnel, and Stephen feels their "fear begin to infect him."

During the month of June of 1916, British miners laid miles of explosives throughout the French mines and tunnels. Their efforts resulted in a total of 227 mine explosions for the month, or approximately one detonation every three hours.

One of the men refuses to advance deeper into the tunnel. Afraid that the soldier will get them all killed, Stephen asks him, "You hate the Germans don't you?" When the man responds "yes," Stephen orders, "Get in there." Together, they move forward.

This is an example of Stephen's hate fueling his actions and the actions of his soldiers. The underground is a terrifying place, and Stephen finds courage in his hatred.

Jack tells Stephen that the men laying the mine are worried that Germans are tunneling through into their chamber. Stephen looks at his frightened men who are sitting down to rest. "We're going to kill some Germans," he says. "Get up."

Stephen motivates his men with the prospect of taking lives, and this again underscores the blind killing and depravity that takes place during war.

The men come across a section of the tunnel where German soldiers have obviously broken through, and a sudden explosion rocks the earth. They take off running, intending to cut the Germans off before they can reach their men, when gunfire erupts behind them. Stephen's men throw grenades and fire their guns back down the tunnel, when Stephen is suddenly struck by the "sensation of having been hit by a falling house."

This close, underground combat is pure chaos. Dust and darkness make it nearly impossible to see, and ricocheting rocks and ammunition seem likely. Because of this, Stephen's survival is pure luck, suggesting that perhaps his superstitious card game is more accurate than even Gray would like to admit.

The men evacuate the tunnel, dragging Stephen behind them. The regimental aid post has been blown up too, and the men do their best to apply field dressings to his wounds. Stephen is impaled with shrapnel and a rifle bullet is lodged in his neck. He is concussed and unconscious.

This early in the war, the military does not have an established medical corps, and much of the provided care occurs on the front lines. Death from infection and gangrene is common, and chances of survival are slim.

As he awaits medical attention in the mud, Stephen is aware of "a profound weariness" when infection sets in. By the time he reaches a dressing station, Stephen is delirious. He begins to hallucinate and calls out for his mother. "They always do," notes the medical officer as he peels back the makeshift dressings.

This passage is particularly effective in representing the horrors of war. For all intents and purposes, Stephen doesn't even have a mother, yet he still calls for her in his suffering. This is a heart-wrenching image.

After the bombardment, Jack and Shaw sit smoking cigarettes and drinking tea. Shaw asks Jack if he knows anything about the injured lieutenant. When he answers no, Shaw tells him to go find out and offers to cover for him if needed.

This passage too underscores how terrible the war is. Jack and Shaw sit smoking and drinking as if this is just another day, because it is just another day—they frequently see this level of death and destruction.

Down the trench line, Jack finds a medical tent and asks an orderly about Stephen. "They put him over the wall," the man says. Jack asks if he is dead, and the man confirms, "It was only an hour ago."

With the high number of causalities, bodies often pile up before the soldiers are able to properly bury them.

Jack wanders down to the ploughed field that holds the endless sea of decaying corpses and torn uniforms, and stands back to assess the death. Suddenly, a figure moves, and Stephen struggles naked to the surface. "Get me out," he manages, and as Jack climbs into the pit of bodies, Stephen falls into his arms.

Dead bodies are a frequent sight for Jack and Stephen; however, the psychological effects of being left for dead in this way are unimaginable, and this highlights the psychological trauma that the soldiers endure.

Meanwhile, at his usual billet, Weir tries not think about Stephen. He has heard nothing about his condition but he believes he is alive. To Weir, Stephen has an "untouchable quality of good fortune about him." He decides that if Stephen is dead, he will write to his next of kin, "if such a person exists."

Of course, Stephen does not have a next of kin, and this passage reminds the reader of this. There is no one to send a telegram to or present a flag to; Stephen's life is completely empty outside of Isabelle and the war.

One day while walking outside, Captain Gray comes to visit Stephen. He tells him he is being given a two-week furlough home to England when he is discharged from the hospital, and that he is being promoted to a desk job. Stephen refuses, and begs to stay. "Everyone knows we're going to attack."

Stephen does not have a home in England to return to, and this sense of emptiness fuels his hatred. He would rather stay and fight, since at least that way he has an outlet for his negative emotions.

Stephen continues, "I have no home in England. I wouldn't know where to go." He implores Gray to speak to the commanding officer. The company will soon be heading to Albert, and Stephen reminds Gray of his fluent French. "Indispensable," Gray says.

The troops' move to Albert is significant in that Stephen has spent time there during peacetime. Albert is where Stephen goes fishing with the Azaires, and this comparison of the location before and during the war helps to relay the effects of war on society.

Gray promises to advocate for Stephen's place in the company if he agrees to "toe the line a bit more." Gray continues and warns Stephen about the superstitious card games he plays with the other men. "I've seen that rubbish in your dugout," Gray says. "Officers are not superstitious, Wraysford. Our lives depend on strategy and tactics, not matchsticks or card games."

Stephen's card game implies that all things, including life and war, are left up to chance and no amount of planning or effort can change an outcome. Obviously, as Grays suggests, this can be damaging to soldiers, who need to believe that their superior officers have a solid plan.

Stephen claims to not truly believe in the card games but simply does it for the men. Gray tells Stephen he does believe because of what happened to him as a child. When Stephen protests, Gray says, "If I help keep you here at the Front, God help you, you will do things my way in the future."

Stephen certainly believes in his card game on some level, as he is known to play it alone. His life has been terrible and lacking in love, and it is easier for him to believe that his pain has been random, rather than something he deserves.

Back at the Front, Stephen and Weir prepare to move out to Albert on Friday, and Stephen promises to take him into town on Thursday night before they leave. Weir guesses that Stephen is looking to find him a woman, and there is a mother/daughter team who will "work through a whole platoon," but the thought fills him with anxiety. Weir knows these acts are natural, but he is in no hurry to have sex.

Weir's frightened response to women and sex disrupts gender stereotypes. He would rather avoid sex, and this runs counter to typical assumptions about men. The prostitutes also disrupt typical stereotypes. Through sex these women are able to independently support themselves, and in the opinion of the military, the prostitutes fulfill a valuable service to the solders.

The previous heavy bombardment has led to "relative quiet," and Stephen can hear the sounds of the German soldiers nearby. He hates them and feels "nothing but an urge of violence." He harnesses his hate "as a means of saving his own life and those of his men." In the starless night, Stephen hears the song of a **nightingale**.

Again, the nightingale is a cruel reminder of nature. Nightingales are typically associated with violence within Greek and Roman mythology, and as such, this birdsong is often interpreted as a lament.

Meanwhile, Jack Firebrace finds solace in thoughts of his son. The love he feels for John "redeems his view of human life and gives substance to this faith in God." The next day, a letter arrives from Margaret, but Jack decides to open it later.

Jack's devotion to his son and the effects of their relationship on Jack's endurance and ability to cope with the war is another testament to the power of love. Jack needs this love to counteract the rampant hate of the war.


Later that evening, Stephen and Weir take a motorbike into town, and when they arrive outside the brothel, Weir becomes uncomfortable. "I don't think I want to go on with this. Look at this place, it's pretty squalid," he says. Stephen urges him on. "It's a woman," he says, "not someone with a gun."

This passage underscores the terrible living conditions of the soldiers. They often live with rats and miscellaneous body parts fortifying their trenches, and they are perpetually covered in lice. The brothel also puts Weir's fear of women and sex into harsh perspective when compared to the literal danger of the war.


An older woman arrives and leads Weir to the back of the establishment, and Stephen is left alone. When Weir returns, he looks "shaken and pale," and Stephen begins to worry about the woman. "What have you done, you raving idiot?" he questions.

Stephen fears that Weir may have hurt one of the women as a symptom of shellshock. Soldiers suffering from PTSD can quickly become disoriented and slip into combat mode, even in nonviolent circumstances.

The older woman appears and leads Stephen to the back bedroom. He claims he isn't interested; he only wants to make sure that everyone is okay. The woman begins to fondle Stephen, and then she kneels and takes him in her mouth. Once Stephen becomes excited, she stands and leaves him alone with a young girl on the bed. "Take you clothes off," she orders.

Again, the explicit sexual nature of this passage disrupts popular stereotypes of women and sexuality. Here, the women are assertive and in control of their sexuality.

Stephen does exactly as he is told, and he notices how beautiful the girl is. As he lays on top of her and enters her, he feels a tenderness towards her, and then, suddenly, nothing. Her naked body reminds him of the mangled bodies in the trenches, and he is filled with a "shuddering revulsion."

Stephen is experiencing symptoms of shellshock (PTSD), which are worsened by his broken heart and profound hate. He can no longer separate his life as a soldier from his life as a civilian.

Looking at the young prostitute, Stephen does "not know whether to take the girl or kill her," and he removes his knife from his pocket. He trails the knife down her body and between her breast, and to the terrified girl, it is clear that he doesn't know what he is doing. She gently slides the knife from his hand and throws it in a far corner, tenderly touching his hand.

Stephen's potentially violent interaction with the prostitute not only brings the seriousness of shellshock to light, but it also highlights the misogyny present in mainstream society. In his right mind, Stephen is angered by violence against women, and his actions in the brothel make this tragedy much more profound.

Stephen looks at her, confused. She says only, "It is very difficult. The war." Stephen apologizes. "I understand," she says. He gathers his belongings and runs from the room.

Historically speaking, there was a spike in domestic violence in the aftermath of WWI. War glorifies violence and simultaneously strips men of power in numerous ways, which results in an increase in abuse at home. Birdsong *emphasizes the problem of violence against women, and Stephen's experiences illustrate how this violence is further confounded by the war.*

The next day Weir receives new orders. They are to march to an unspecified billet, and move on to Albert the next day. At last, the attack is upon them. Weir "resigns to it." His life is out of control and he is humiliated. "The guns [can't] be much worse," he thinks.

Weir's sexual experience at the brothel has had the opposite effect that Stephen intended. Instead of empowering Weir, it has led to an increased feeling of powerlessness. In this vein, Faulks is critical of sex as a means of wartime empowerment or coping for soldiers. Not only has this route been ineffective for both Stephen and Weir, it also serves to increase violence against women.

After his shift, Jack Firebrace takes out Margaret's letter. Reading it, he discovers that his son has died. A part of Jack dies along with him, but he vows not to let it shake his faith. He prays to thank God for the time he had with John, but no words come. He sobs.

Conversely, Jack finds much-needed solace in love (even in the face of his son's death). In this way, Faulks again argues for the motivating nature of love during war.

Once in Albert, the miners are dispatched to the Front and the artillery is allowed some downtime. Captain Gray takes Stephen to dinner at the house the Colonel is billeted at. Colonel Barclay tells the men he intends to "go over the top" himself, and when Gray introduces him to Stephen, Barclay refers to him as "the Somme expert."

To "go over the top" refers to the act of exiting the relative safety of the trenches for the open air of No Man's Land. While Barclay may knowingly send his men to certain death, he at least has the integrity to go with them.

Colonel Barclay tells Stephen that they will be "the first wave of attack." As they enjoy dinner in the elaborate dining room, Stephen thinks of his men in the trenches with lice and cups of tea, and he immediately feels guilty. He smiles, "aware that his brief flight from reality will soon end."

This passage again serves to underscore the horrible living conditions of the soldiers. Lice is a minor nuisance compared to bullets, but the insects have major effects on the soldiers. Lice are responsible for trench fever, which plagues the soldiers with headaches, fever, and muscle pain.

The battalion marches into the village of Colincamps, and the men find a local billet for the night. With darkness comes gunfire, and the barn Stephen is trying to sleep in rocks and shakes throughout the night. Without sleep, the men set out for Auchonvillers in the morning, singing "marching songs with banal, repeated words of home."

The soldiers singing as they march into Auchonvillers harkens back to Stephen's discussion with René and Bérard about French soldiers returning from war with Prussia. Faulks's use of the word "banal" underscores the "essential loss of purity" that Bérard once argued.

Stephen sees a group of men digging a mass grave, and the battalion moves on in silence. When they arrive in Auchonvillers, Stephen sees Colonel Barclay rallying the troops. "You are going to attack," he yells. "The enemy will be relieved to see someone to whom he can surrender."

The constant digging of graves is a significant cause of psychological stress for the soldiers. On average, about 57% of enlisted soldiers will not return home, and many of the men simply wait their turn to die.

The men cheer Barclay, but their enthusiasm is hampered by the military police shouting instructions. "Any man shirking his duty will be shot on the spot," they are told. For effect, the MPs read from lists of names of men who have been "executed for cowardice."

Faulks again highlights how unspeakable acts are committed during war, seemingly without protest by the soldiers. The men are essentially bullied into doing what they know is wrong in exchange for a slightly greater chance of survival.

Stephen notices Tipper "smiling madly" in the sea of men, and he notices Weir standing with the miners. Stephen yells to ask Weir if he will be with them tomorrow during the attack. "Watching from a safe distance," he laughs. "Our work is done." Weir tells Stephen that a few of his men have volunteered to carry stretchers, but for the most part, they have all cleared out.

Again, Tipper is the personification of shellshock, and this is why he smiles "madly." This passage also highlights the vital role miners played. Not only do they make it possible for the soldiers to fight, but they often volunteer to care for the wounded in the absence of a medical corps.

Gray calms the men and recaps the battle plan with them. They will be covered by artillery fire as they advance, and once they take their objective, the artillery will continue. "It provides protection for you all the way," he says. "The German wire is already cut and many of their guns destroyed. Causalities will be ten per cent."

The German wire is the area of fencing and barbed wire that protects the German trenches on the other side of No Man's Land. If the wire is not cut beforehand, the British soldiers cannot get through to the German trenches, and they become sitting ducks out in the open of No Man's Land.

Gray looks to Stephen and tells him that he wants him to take charge of the company should he be killed in the attack. "Because you are a mad, cold-hearted devil and that is what we are going to need." He further tells Stephen that the German wire isn't cut. A "staff cockup," Gray says. "Don't tell your men, Wraysford. Don't tell them, just pray for them."

Ironically, Stephen is not the "mad, cold-hearted devil" Gray assumes him to be. He constantly questions the morality of his actions and is deeply affected by the "staff cockup" that fails to cut the German wire. Stephen cannot protest, though, which makes his pain all the more significant.

That night, the men write letters home. Tipper writes to his parents and tells them that they "have been the dearest Mum and Dad," and Stephen writes Isabelle, even though he knows the letter will never reach her. He tells her that "some crime against nature is about to be committed," and he is scared that he will be killed.

Through the soldiers' letters, Faulks highlights the human element of the war. The letters have the effect of giving nameless, faceless soldiers real identities with mothers and fathers who will miss them.

The guns go quiet to reserve shells eight hours before the attack, and the men are told to go in at seven-thirty. They are surprised that they are waiting until daylight, and the men begin to drink. They hear German guns fire and, thinking that most of the guns have been disarmed, they are surprised to hear it.

The silence of the guns serves to amplify the continuous gunfire that the men endure. Soldiers grow accustomed to the constant barrage of gunfire, and this is only fully appreciated once it stops.

The British shoot back and part of their trench explodes. Fire shoots into the sky, and Stephen thinks something must be wrong. "We must go now," he thinks, but he receives no word to advance early.

Faulks's countdown of the moments before the charge serves to emphasize Stephen's anxiety and apprehension.

There is still ten minutes to go before seven-thirty. When his watch finally reads the correct time, Stephen steps out of the trench and an eerie silence falls, cut by the song of **skylarks**.

The skylark, which also is symbolic of daybreak, represents the normal course of nature in the face of war.

Stephen presses on and a man missing half his face wanders by, his gun still drawn. Just as Gray had warned, the wire is not cut, and countless men are stuck, entwined in the barbed-wire, vulnerable in the open space. Stephen notes a gap in the wire and makes his way toward it.

Again, the extreme violence of Birdsong *gives the reader a realistic understanding of the experience of war, including the disturbing images that the public is often spared in typical historical accounts.*

Surprisingly, Stephen makes it through the barrage of gunfire, and he begins to laugh to himself. He enters the German trench and looks around. It is well crafted and clean, and when he moves further down, he finds one of his men firing toward the Germans.

Stephen's continued survival does not make sense. Statistically speaking, he should have died long ago. Stephen's luck gives credence to his superstitious card game.

A couple of hours pass, and they continue firing. They are trapped; they can't move forward much towards the Germans (their defenses have barely fallen) and going back across No Man's Land is impossible. Stephen senses movement under his feet and notices a badly injured man. His eye socket is blown out and he begs Stephen to kill him. He is from a different regiment, and Stephen hesitates. He thinks, "no one will know," and he shoots the man twice. It is his first kill of the day.

The image of Stephen killing another British soldier further brings the horrors of war to light. It is expected that Stephen will kill enemy soldiers; however, the mercy killing of his fellow soldier amplifies the horrific nature of his predicament. Additionally, because of the poor planning that results in this massacre, the soldier's death is in vain.

Jack and Shaw watch from a distance and can't believe the carnage. They expected a swift attack, and now they stand watching the men die. The hole they had blown earlier in the day has done little good, and they "clutch each other's arms in disbelief." Jack "thinks of meat, the smell of it."

Faulks's comparison of the smell of battle to the smell of meat is a strong descriptive tool that elicits the reader's senses in relaying the horrors of war.

As Stephen looks out of the German trench he thinks, "Nothing is divine anymore; everything is profane." He hears the roars of the Lewis guns, but he is driven to go on. First he must drink, and he has lost his canteen in the chaos.

This passage highlights the depravity of war and the lengths the men will go to win. Death and dying has replaced religion and goodness in the world.

As he searches for water, Stephen sees more of his men cut down, and he prays for night to fall. Once it is dark, he thinks, "the earth might resume its natural process, and perhaps, in many years' time, what had happened during daylight could be viewed as an aberration, could be comprehended within the rhythm of normal life." But this seems impossible now, and to Stephen, war is the "new reality."

Stephen believes that war is unnatural and a crime against humanity, so it stands to reason that it will never be comprehended in the "rhythm of normal life." The war is his new reality, and he will have to live with the pain and death long after it is over (if he survives).

Stephen is finally is able to stagger down to the river for a drink, and while satisfying his thirst, he stumbles and is swept downstream, surrounded by German soldiers. As they are all helpless in the water, Stephen "tries to hate them now as he had hated them before." He sees a British soldier standing on a bridge upriver, and he safely pulls him out.

Washing down the river and headed for certain death, Stephen finds it difficult to hate the German soldiers. In that moment they cease to be enemies; rather, they are helpless fellow humans headed for the same fate.


An impact comes from nowhere and strikes Stephen in the temple. He wakes sometime later to Tyson, one of Weir's miners, bandaging his wounds. "They stopped attacking," Tyson says. He tells Stephen he has only a flesh wound and runs to get Weir.

Again, it is not a doctor or nurse who cares for Stephen, but a miner. This underscores their importance during the war.

The remaining men have gathered for roll call. The names of eight hundred men are called into the night, but only one hundred and fifty-five answer.

Clearly, this number is way over the estimated 10% casualty rate falsely claimed by Gray.

Weir starts to shake. The guns have stopped, yet he still asks Stephen if he can hear them. Stephen hadn't noticed before, but in the silence is the low continuous moan of countless men dying. To Stephen, it sounds as if "the earth itself is groaning." "Oh God, oh God," Weir cries. "What have we done, what have we done?"

Once again, Faulks's descriptive and disturbing depiction of violence highlights the unspeakable circumstances of the war. In this way, Faulks argues that future generations must have in-depth knowledge of all *the aspects of war in order to fully grasp the cost to humanity.*


As Weir cries, he asks Stephen to hold him and call him by his name. Stephen pulls him close. "It's all right, Michael. It's all right, Michael. Hold on, don't let go. Hold on, hold on."

Stephen's tender treatment of Weir not only continues to upset gender stereotypes, but it also speaks to his inherent goodness. Stephen loves more deeply than he realizes.


PART THREE: ENGLAND 1978

In a crowded Underground tunnel, Elizabeth Benson waits for her stop. She tiredly pushes her way out of the car and onto the platform at Lancaster Gate, making her way home. She finds a letter from Brussels in her mail slot.

Through Elizabeth's mundane experience on the subway, Faulks highlights the present generation's ignorance of history. This is the same tunnel that Jack Firebrace tirelessly dug, and Elizabeth is completely unaware of this.

Her lover, Robert, only sends letters when he is feeling guilty, and she smiles at his familiar words. As Elizabeth slides into the bathtub, the phone rings and her mother invites her for tea the next day. She accepts and readies herself for a night out.

This passage establishes Elizabeth's affair with a married man. Elizabeth's love for Robert mirrors Stephen's affair with Isabelle. It also shows Elizabeth as a modern woman who loves whom she pleases without apology.

Elizabeth has been close with Mark and Lindsay since college, and their friendship is comfortable and predictable. Lindsay has long since been trying to fix Elizabeth up with a man, and tonight will be no different. "Your trouble," Lindsay says, "is that you frighten men off."

Lindsay's opinion of Elizabeth's "trouble" with men is in keeping with popular gender stereotypes. Women are expected to be weak and dependent upon men, but Elizabeth refuses to live this way.

Elizabeth reminds Lindsay about Robert, whom Lindsay refers to as "the Eurocat." "He's never going to leave his wife," she warns. Elizabeth shrugs. She cares very little if he does. Lindsay laughs. She asks about children—at thirty-eight, Elizabeth doesn't have much time. Elizabeth admits that she would like them, but first she wants to know why.

This passage underscores popular expectations of women and motherhood. Lindsay suggests that Elizabeth is incomplete without a child—that somehow her life will be wasted if she doesn't procreate. Elizabeth challenges this assumption by leading a full life as a single woman.

Lindsay laughs. "It's called biology," she says. "You don't need to know anything." Elizabeth deeply disagrees. She *needs* to know why. "I think one should have some sort of reason for doing something that, on the face of it, is quite unnecessary," Elizabeth says.

Obviously, Elizabeth's life does not literally depend on procreation. Drawing attention to this biological fact makes Elizabeth's realization that her life metaphorically depends on future generations all the more powerful.

That night, Lindsay introduces Elizabeth to a new man name Stuart. They engage in small talk, and he asks Elizabeth what she does for a living. She tells him that she runs a clothing company and Stuart asks her to clarify. "You say you run it. You're the boss, are you?"

Stuart's questioning of Elizabeth's profession is a product of her sexist society. Stuart is in disbelief of her success because positions such as hers are traditionally held by men.

Despite Stuart's "cross-examination" of her, Elizabeth rather enjoys talking to him, and when he doesn't ask for the number at the end of the night she is "relieved, though also fractionally disappointed." As she drives home, she thinks about what it would be like to married.

Elizabeth subconsciously fears that she scared Stuart off, just as Lindsay accuses her of doing with most men. She is obviously bothered by the effect her independence and success has on the men she meets.

When Elizabeth arrives home, she remembers that she forgot to buy milk. Then she realizes it doesn't matter. She can sleep until she wants and do what she wants when she wakes—there is no one to disrupt "her tranquil routine."

This passage illustrates the simplicity of Elizabeth's life. She does not have the typical demands on her time that many women do, and Elizabeth views this a positive aspect in her life.

The next morning, Elizabeth notices an article in the paper about the 1918 armistice. It catches her eye, but the "topic seemed too large, too fraught, and too remote" to her. Still, the article lingers in her mind.

Elizabeth represents the typical modern citizen in her ignorance of history and war. She has very little working knowledge of the war and its effect on her current society.

At tea with her mother, Françoise, Elizabeth asks her about the war; "Something about the war article had unsettled her: it seemed to touch an area of disquiet and curiosity that was connected to her own life and its choices."

This passage implies that the war is deeply connected to present and future generations, even in ways they don't quite grasp or understand. In this way, Faulks argues the importance of remembrance.

Elizabeth asks her mother if she still has her father's old journals, but Françoise is unsure. She believes that she may have thrown them away. Elizabeth claims she is "mildly curious. It must have something do with my age," she says. She feels that she is in "danger of losing touch with the past."

Again, this passage highlights the importance of the past on future generations. Elizabeth better understands herself and the world once she learns about her history, including the dark past of the war.

The following week, Elizabeth goes to visit Erich and Irene, her principal designers, at their office. Erich is in his early seventies, and he is very fond of Elizabeth. "What a wife you would have made my son," he tells her often. While the company has been around for many years, its recent success is due in large part to Elizabeth and the young customers she commissions.

Erich's insistence that Elizabeth would make a good wife for his son is rooted in their sexist society. Erich's belief that Elizabeth is good wife material minimizes her success as the manager of the company. Instead of commenting on how well she does her job, he focuses on the job he thinks she is neglecting.

Elizabeth asks Irene what she knows about the war and if her father fought in it. Irene's not sure, although he would have been the right age and he definitely fought in *something*. "I've seen his medals," Irene says.

This passage highlights how suppressed the stories of war actually are. It seems ridiculous that Irene is unsure of which war exactly her father fought in, and this underscores how little the soldiers spoke about their experiences.

Elizabeth turns to Erich, who was a young boy in Austria during the war. "I have no idea," he says. "I don't think about war." He is sure that Elizabeth's English schools must have taught her, but she doesn't remember. "I don't seem to have been paying attention," she says. "Exactly," Erich tells her. "It's morbid to dwell on it." He calls it "ancient history" and shrugs Elizabeth off. She isn't so sure it is "ancient history."

With this passage, Faulks argues that there is no such thing as "ancient history." The impact of the war is as important today as it was seventy years ago, and it will continue to be in the future. Not only is the war a profound lesson on the potentially evil nature of humankind, it also lends valuable insight into Elizabeth's modern life.

By the end of the week, Elizabeth is on a boat to France. She is planning a visit with Robert in Brussels, and she wants to stop at a World War I memorial before moving on to see him. Ashamed, Elizabeth realizes she doesn't even know what a battlefield looks like.

Again, Elizabeth has zero understanding of what her grandfather endured. She doesn't know how or where he fought, and she realizes that she is poorly informed regarding her own history. Faulks argues that society is likewise poorly informed.

Elizabeth arrives in the town of Arras. While her own grandmother was French, she doesn't speak the language and she doesn't know the country well at all. She knows that battles were fought locally, but it appears to be a city. She thought battles were fought in the countryside. Elizabeth wonders what it matters anyway. After all, this is just a stopover on her way to see Robert.

Elizabeth still isn't emotionally invested in the war and her history. She is preoccupied with the present and her personal life, and she easily dismisses the war. In this way, Elizabeth represents a typical, modern-day approach to history.

Suddenly, Elizabeth is determined to learn about the town and the battle. "What did it matter?" she thought. "It mattered passionately." Her grandfather had fought in this war, in the very same place she now stands, and she wants to feel connected to him—and this place.

Elizabeth realizes that like her life now, her grandfather's life mattered—only his was consumed by this war that she knows nothing about. This is the point at which Elizabeth becomes emotionally invested in the war and its effects on her modern life.

The next day, Elizabeth drives to a town named Albert. Irene's husband, Bob, had told her about the town, and after a few minutes of driving she begins to see cemeteries and a large "ugly" arch. At first, Elizabeth mistakes the arch for a factory, but then she realizes it is the monument.

Faulks's use of the word "ugly" to describe the arch mirrors the ugliness and death that prompted the existence of the monument in the first place. In this way, Faulks's description resists glorifying the violence of the war.

Out of the car now, she walks up to the arch through the meticulously manicured lawn. A man is sweeping the pavement, and as she approaches, Elizabeth notes that the arch is covered in British names. She is struck by the size and number of names, and she asks the man what they mean.

Notably, other than the man sweeping the memorial site, there aren't any other people around. The monument stands in the middle of an empty field, and no one is near to appreciate it.

The man tells Elizabeth that the names represent the men who are unaccounted for after the battle in Albert. "Men who died in this battle?" she questions. He clarifies—just the lost men, the dead are in the cemeteries. "The unfound?" she asks, disbelievingly. "Just these fields," says the man, gesturing to the surrounding land. Elizabeth stops, visibly struck. "Nobody told me," she whispers. "My God, nobody told me."

This passage is a powerful reminder of Elizabeth's ignorance. The names represent her dead ancestors, but she has never been taught the cost of war and depth of their sacrifice. Like her grandfather, Elizabeth has "no sense of the scale of sacrifice" involved in the war.

Later, Elizabeth arrives in Brussels to visit Robert. She notes that she always feels nervous when she visits him. Because of him, she is part of a continuing lie and she feels obliged to live alone, waiting for him. When she visits him, she is slightly afraid that she will find he's not worth all the hassle. As he answers the door, she throws herself into his open arms.

Despite her happiness with Robert, Elizabeth's relationship is not carefree. Society has vilified her as "the other woman," and while this doesn't exactly square with who she is, Elizabeth is forced to assume this identity in many ways.

They get ready for dinner and head out on the town. While they eat, Robert asks Elizabeth about her week, and she tells him about her sudden preoccupation with the war. He listens patiently as she explains the arch. "But nothing had prepared me for what I saw. The scale of it," she tells him.

Again, this passage makes plain Elizabeth's historical ignorance, but it also highlights Robert's love and respect for her. He patiently waits as she rambles—he does not interrupt her like René and Bérard interrupt and dismiss Isabelle.

In the following days, Elizabeth goes to visit Françoise. She has been thinking about her grandfather's journals, which she suspects are in the attic, and she wants to find them. Elizabeth tells her mother that she is looking for her own old diary, and goes into the attic to snoop.

Elizabeth's secrecy in looking for her grandfather's journals mirrors Stephen's secrecy in recording his experiences during the war.

The attic is filled with random boxes, but buried beneath a pile of old trunks and papers Elizabeth hits pay dirt. Two books are at the bottom of a pile, and one is labeled, "Captain Stephen Wraysford, April 1917." Another book is unlabeled and full of Greek script.

The Greek script that Stephen has coded his writing in represents society's broader attempts to obscure painful history. Stephen hides his shame in his encrypted writing much like society hides the shame of war.

Elizabeth tells Françoise what she has found. "That's it," her mother says. Françoise says there were many more, but these are all that remain. "I always thought," she says, "that if he wanted anyone to understand them he would have written them in plain English."

Again, this passage is exactly why Stephen codes his language. The irony of Françoise's comment highlights the fact that Stephen doesn't want anyone to know about the awful things he has seen and done.

The next weekend, Elizabeth takes the book to Bob and Irene's house. She is hoping that Bob will be able to shed some light on the strange writing. "I've got an idea," Bob says. He turns to Elizabeth and asks her why she really wants to know about them. She tells him that she has a "vague idea" that the journals will help her understand something.

With this interaction, Faulks argues that history has a profound effect on the present and future. Elizabeth's past helps her to better understand certain aspects of her modern life because, as Faulks asserts, history really does repeat itself.

Bob tells Elizabeth that the writing is in Greek script, but it is not the Greek language, and it's not English either. He has some ideas for cracking the code, and he asks Elizabeth to leave the journal with him.

Stephen's hybrid writing is the result of his extensive education and his benefactor's efforts to socially reform him. Ironically, Stephen uses the skills he learned for the betterment of society to explain its violent destruction.

The next day, Stuart calls Elizabeth for a date and she agrees. He takes her to a Chinese restaurant that he claims is authentic, and he spends most of the night explaining the dishes on the menu. After, they go to Stuart's house and he plays the piano for her. As she leaves to go home, it occurs to Elizabeth that she loves Robert as much as she does because he is not a threat to her independence.

Stuart dominates the conversation the entire night, and the topics he selects highlight his own knowledge and talents. Instead of being interested in Elizabeth, Stuart is busy expressing his own importance and power.

PART FOUR: FRANCE 1917

After three weeks of rain, the communication trench has become a flooded "cesspool." In the poor conditions, Stephen Wraysford is beginning to feel differently about his men, and at times he feels love for them. They are resilient and he finds this "endearing," but he now believes that there is no line that they won't cross.

Despite the horrible conditions, Stephen's hatred is beginning to fade. Ironically, the soldiers' ability to endure the hardships of war and their silent acquiescence to the terrible acts Stephen believes are degrading them are the very things that he finds so "endearing."

Much of Stephen's original unit is dead, and a few have had to return home to England. Some of the men are missing and presumed dead, and many rest in mass graves. There are also those who have been "reduced to particles so small" that they have blown away in the wind.

This passage highlights the constant turnaround of soldiers during the war. When Stephen speaks of "his men," he is talking about several men over the course of four years.

Arriving on the front line, new boots are distributed—of course, the boots are one-size-fits-all and stuffed with "putrid rags." A new subaltern, Ellis, arrives and tells Stephen that he would like to go to Amiens on their next leave. Stephen declines to join him. "It's just a railway junction," he says.

Stephen attempts more self-preservation by not acknowledging the importance of Amiens in his life. This passage also illustrates the meager supplies and uniforms the soldiers are equipped with.

Ellis tells Stephen that the tunnel head is nearby, and that Captain Weir is there. When Stephen goes to see Weir, the men behave awkwardly and don't shake hands. Weir says that the men have received a new shipment of **canaries**—they have been worried about gas underground—and he asks Stephen if he has any whiskey. Weir has run out of whiskey and his hands are shaking.

Weir acts awkwardly in Stephen's presence because he believes that his interaction with the prostitute has made him less of a man, and Stephen senses this too. The canaries are used to detect toxic gases underground—if the bird dies, this signals a warning to the soldier. Ironically, the death of the bird allows the soldiers to live.

Weir has just returned back to the Front from England. At home in Leamington Spa, Weir's father had barely looked up from the large toad he was feeding when his son arrived unexpectedly. His mother had been at choir practice, and Weir had missed tea and the ripe tomatoes from the garden. His clothes no longer fit him, and there were only leftovers to eat.

Life has continued without Weir back in England, and his visit with his parents is a cruel reminder of this. They make very little fuss over his visit (he is even made to eat leftovers), and much like his clothes, Weir doesn't seem to fit into his life anymore. Weir represents the tragic homecoming of many World War I soldiers.

Weir tried to tell his parents about the war; however, his father interrupted him. "We've read about it in the papers," he said. They didn't seem to understand the war at all, and there was no beer in the house. After his parents went to bed, Weir downed a two-thirds-full bottle of sherry.

Weir's father can't possibly understand the war just because he read about it the papers. Weir's homecoming also sheds light on alcoholism and veterans' use of drinking to cope with the aftermath of war.

Back on at the Front, Weir asks Stephen to tell his fortune. Stephen orders one of the men to bring him a rat, and then he lights candles and grabs a deck of cards. He cuts the rat from open, disemboweling it in the candlelight, and lays out the cards. "For Christ's sake," says Ellis. "You should be ashamed of yourselves."

It is highly ironic that Ellis protests the senseless killing of the rat. Presumably, Ellis has killed many men, yet he thinks that Stephen should be ashamed because of the rat—or because of indulging the men's superstitions.

Stephen tells Weir that his horoscope is wonderful—only he should stay away from priests and women. Weir's cards also represent peace, power, and stability. "You fixed it," Weir accuses Stephen.

Stephen tells Weir what he wants to hear, but more than that, he gives his friend something to believe in during the senselessness of war.

Stephen denies fixing the cards and asks Weir why he wants to survive so badly. Weir tells him all he has is his life. "Perhaps I will do something with it later," he says.

Sadly, this interaction foreshadows Weir's death and it highlights an obvious, but great, tragedy of war—Weir never gets the chance to do something with his life.

Weir tells Stephen about his visit to England and the disappointment that is his family. Weir wishes they understood the war better—that they had a better idea of what he is going through. He says his father was "bored," and that he wishes a bombardment would kill them.

This passage is extreme, but it nevertheless relays Weir's true feelings. Only in their own violent death could Weir's parents possibly understand what he is going through.

As the men talk, Stephen tells Weir that he continues to fight not for England and those living back home, but for the soldiers who have died and disappeared. Weir then mentions that Tyson was killed at Beaumont-Hamel.

Tyson's death is significant to Stephen because he has saved his life in the past. Stephen keeps fighting to stay alive so that the men who died for him have not suffered in vain, and this is evidence of his growing love for them.

Stephen becomes "drunk and confessional" and tells Weir about using magic and superstition as a child. He tells Weir that he wanted to live in a make-believe world because reality was unbearable. Stephen wanted to believe that he had an important destiny. Now, all he believes in is "a room, a place, some self-grounded place."

Weir clings to Stephen's superstition for the same reasons that Stephen did as a child. Weir's own reality of the war is unbearable, and as he has already said, he would like to do something positive with his life. The card game makes him feel like he has more of a chance.

In another dugout, Jack and Shaw try to get some sleep. In the small hole, the men curl up together, and Jack has become very familiar with the curves of Shaw's body. He notes that he can sleep as well with Shaw in the dugout as he has ever slept in bed with Margaret at home in London.

Once again, Faulks's tender and intimate description of Jack and Shaw's love and comradery challenges popular images of men and masculinity. This overtly sexual representation is unexpected and powerful.

Meanwhile, Weir's company is working on a shallow tunnel, and they hear German activity nearby. He orders the tunnel evacuated, but men must remain to man listening posts. Of course, no one volunteers, and they turn to a duty roster. Suddenly, the Germans blow the tunnel.

This passage stresses the extreme danger of working in the tunnels. The Germans are clearly aware of their location, and it is only a matter of time before they blow the tunnel.

"I *knew* this would happen," Weir says. Stephen agrees to go in the tunnel with him. Not even the stretcher-bearers will go down to get injured men until an officer tells them where to go. Weir grabs a new **canary**, and they head underground.

The canary infuses a bit of optimism into an otherwise dire situation. Again, it is evidence of nature's indifference to their suffering.

Weir and Stephen quickly come upon the end of the tunnel. There should be at least another thirty feet, but the tunnel has been blown completely. Weir takes a stethoscope and listens at the wall. "Nothing." He tells Stephen that two men, including Shaw, are on the other side, but there is no way to get them out. Stephen and Weir say a prayer.

Of course, this passage is significant because of the death of Shaw. Also notable is that despite the additional loss of his son, John, Jack's love for his friend and the time that they have already been blessed with is enough to sustain him. Again, Faulks continues to argue for the power of love even in the face of death.

The two men must turn around to exit the tunnel, but there is not room, so Weir crawls over Stephen to get ahead of him. His pick dislodges the disturbed dirt and a large chunk of earth falls on Weir, breaking his arm and ribs.

This is the worst possible injury for Weir. Soldiers often purposefully broke limbs to avoid fighting, and injuries of this nature are always looked upon with suspicion.

In the small collapse, the **bird** is lost. Weir begins to panic; letting a canary go free in a tunnel is an automatic court-martial. The men go about looking for the bird and Stephen sees it nearby. He lunges at it and screams, missing it. Weir is able to grab it but with a broken arm he won't be able to both crawl and carry the canary. Stephen suggests they just kill it.

The loss of the bird symbolizes Stephen and Weir's loss of optimism. Still, the fact that both men are unable to kill the bird represents at least some residual optimism (and morality) even in this dire situation.

Neither man can kill the **bird**, so Stephen is forced to carry it. He ties it in his handkerchief and must hold it in his mouth in order to crawl from the cramped tunnel. With the bird flapping in his face, they finally make it out of the tunnel and to the surface.

Stephen is forced to overcome his fear of birds. If he lets the bird go, Weir will be court-martialed and possibly even executed. Stephen loves Weir, and because of this love, Stephen is able to overcome his lifelong fear.

In the following days, Gray gives Ellis and Stephen permission to go to Amiens for a few days on leave. Stephen agrees to go, and when the two arrive in the city, they find it nearly destroyed and buried under a pile of debris.

This passage serves to emphasize the civilian loss and suffering that occurred during the war.

Stephen asks Ellis what he plans to do on leave. Since Ellis has never been on leave, he's really not sure. Stephen says most men get drunk and visit a brothel. Ellis doesn't like the sound of a brothel, but Stephen reassures him that it is expected. The army thinks that it is healthy to visit women during leave and encourages it—the brothels are even sanctioned by the military police. Stephen further tells Ellis that he is not interested, but the option is open. Ellis declines.

This passage again highlights how the military encourages sex as a coping mechanism and morale-booster. The fact that both Stephen and Ellis decline to partake in this is expected activity is further proof of Faulks's greater argument that sex is actually an adverse coping mechanism for the stressors of war.

Stephen takes Ellis to the café where he had once seen Isabelle walking past the window, but it has changed and is a sad sight. The new proprietor tells Stephen that the previous owner was sent to a German prison, like many of the men in town.

This passage also shows the effects of war on civilians. Innocent people are rounded up and sent to prison camps.

Later, Ellis and Stephen share a few drinks in a rowdy bar before Stephen excuses himself for a walk. Leaving Ellis, he finds a quiet bar and orders a drink. As he sips, a woman enters and buys a bottle of liquor. She looks familiar.

The fact that Stephen recognizes this strange woman is a testament to his love for Isabelle. He has never met Jeanne, yet he instinctually notices her.

As Stephen approaches the woman in the street, she appears to know him as well. It is Isabelle's sister, Jeanne, and she agrees to talk with Stephen. He asks about Isabelle, and Jeanne claims she is "all right." She tells Stephen that she is loyal to her sister and won't be giving him much information.

Jeanne's loyalty to her sister is also a testament to the power of love. She fears that Stephen's presence will cause Isabelle more pain, and she wants to spare her.

Stephen is suspicious of her presence in Amiens, and Jeanne admits to coming to care for Isabelle. After Isabelle left Stephen, Jeanne says, Isabelle returned to Rouen and eventually went home to René. After the German occupation, when René was led away by the Germans, Isabelle was injured in a heavy bombardment. She is better now, but Jeanne has come to town to care for her.

Isabelle's injury in the bombardment is a representation of the many civilian casualties of war. It is not only soldiers who are injured, but innocent citizens as well.

Stephen tells Jeanne that he wants to see Isabelle. She won't take him to her, but she agrees to tell her about his request. They plan to meet at the same bar the next night.

Again, this is further evidence of Jeanne's love for Isabelle. She will only help Stephen if Isabelle is in complete agreement.

After leaving Jeanne, Stephen walks down to the boulevard du Cange. The landscape is familiar and memories rush back and overwhelm him. As he approaches the house, he sees that most of the rear of the house has been destroyed—including the servants' quarters and **the red room**.

The red room symbolizes Stephen and Isabelle's love, and like the physical structure of the room, this love has been destroyed. This serves as a physical representation of Stephen's broken heart.

The next night, Stephen meets Jeanne as planned, and she tells him that Isabelle has agreed to see him, and she is to take him to the apartment they share. Jeanne leads him to a nearby apartment, which is dark and modest with fresh daisies in a vase.

The dark atmosphere of the apartment mirrors the sisters' dismal lives in Amiens during the war. The daisies show the sisters' attempt at some normalcy during the war.

Isabelle waits for him in a darkened room, and as Stephen enters he is shocked. Isabelle's face is greatly disfigured. A large scar runs from her hairline to her jaw, and it is clear that her ear has been surgically repaired. The left side of her body appears slack and paralyzed.

Isabelle's outward appearance matches her inner shame and turmoil. She is ashamed of the choices she has made, and she continues to keep their child a secret from Stephen.

Isabelle tells him not to worry; it looks bad but doesn't cause any pain. She tells Stephen that she was twice injured by a shell—first at the house, and then while living in a small apartment in town. "It was unlucky," she says.

Isabelle subconsciously views her bad luck as punishment for loving Stephen. After all, she has the found more traditional routes of penance "unsatisfying."

Isabelle tells Stephen what came of her after she left him. While she did go home to Rouen, it was not long before her father arranged her move back to Amiens, and after Lisette and Grégoire begged her to return, she finally agreed. René had become an "ashamed" and "diminished" man.

René became "ashamed" and "diminished" because his power within the patriarchy had been disrupted. René is emasculated by Isabelle's affair and subsequent pregnancy, and he has lost face within the community because of it.

It was not long before the war broke out, Isabelle says, and after Amiens was occupied by the Germans, René was taken as a prisoner. He was eventually released, but then the Germans ordered all men of service age to report for duty. Over four thousand townsmen agreed to willingly fight for the Germans, and the Germans, surprised by the men's cowardice, were unable to handle that many prisoners. They let them all go but five hundred men, and René was one of them.

The Germans are surprised by the men's cowardice because their willing agreement to fight for the Germans effectively makes them traitors. They will be expected to fight against the French cause, but they do this willingly to save their lives.

The house on the boulevard du Cange was taken over by the Germans, and Isabelle met a Prussian soldier named Max. Max was kind to Isabelle, and while his nationality made her feel like a traitor, she has nevertheless fallen in love with him.

Isabelle engages in multiple sexual relationships throughout Birdsong. *As a woman, Isabelle is expected to be loyal to one man, but instead she follows her heart and her desires.*

Isabelle does not tell Stephen about the child. She had fallen in love with Max in large part because he had taken such good care of the child during the occupation, and while she wants Stephen to know about Max, she leaves this information out of her story. She does, however, tell Stephen that she had received his letter from the Front.

Isabelle wants Stephen to know about Max so that she will appear more unavailable to him, and will never have to tell him about their baby. Notably, Isabelle does not fall in love with Max because of his love for her; she falls in love with Max because of his love for her child, which is the very thing she fears is lacking in Stephen.

Isabelle goes on to tell Stephen that Grégoire will join the army next year and that Lisette is happily married to Lucien Lebrun, who is also serving in the army. Stephen thinks he hears the sound of a child, but Isabelle claims that Jeanne has two cats.

Of course, Lucien is the same man whom René accused Isabelle of having an affair with. Ironically, Lucien becomes a large part of their lives anyway.

Stephen asks Isabelle if he may touch her, and when she answers yes, he gently runs his hand along her mangled face. She is immediately struck by her desire for him, and he turns without speaking and exits the room.

This again underscores the physical nature of Isabelle's attraction to Stephen. She does not feel desire until he touches her. If Isabelle's love was true (like Stephen's is), it seems appropriate that she would feel this desire immediately.

Back at headquarters, Gray tells Stephen that he is going back to the front line tomorrow. Gray is being pressured to send Stephen for a staff job on account of his fluent French, and he can't put off his promotion much longer. He assures Stephen that the post will only last a few months, but first he must take home leave and go back to England.

Again, this passage emphasizes the fact that Stephen has no one in his life and no true home to speak of. He has just left Isabelle, the only love he has ever known, and she is clearly unobtainable.

Gray tells Stephen about a company that had killed some enemy prisoners after a long bombardment instead of marching them to the camp, which was five miles away uphill. Stephen feels that they should be charged. While he hates the Germans and has come to value his men, he has "learned to love the rule book." He believes that some space must be left "for dignity to grow again."

The killing of the German prisoners is exactly the kind depravity that Faulks repeatedly argues against in Birdsong. *Of course, Stephen hates the Germans, yet he despises the violent nature of the war more, and he objects to this open and unapologetic form of killing.*

Gray asks Stephen if he is still performing card tricks. He admits to entertaining Weir, but no one else. Gray asks him if he believes in it himself, and Stephen tells him about fixing the cards. He tells Gray that he believes in war and in "the possibility of an explanation.

Despite the depravity of the war, the fact that Stephen believes in the possibility of an explanation suggests some optimism.

Meanwhile, as the miners bury Shaw's recovered body, Jack throws a handful of dirt into the mass grave. He wasn't surprised when he received the news. He had no reason to think that his dear friend would survive when even John was dead. Still, Jack is determined to honor him, and he tips a glass in his memory and spends the evening telling the other men jokes and singing songs.

Jack's faith in love is unshakable, and in this way, Faulks continues to argue the power of love even when it appears hopeless. Other than Margaret, Jack has lost everyone he holds dear, yet he is driven by their memory.

In the following days, Jack and the other men are given the rare opportunity to bathe. They hand in their putrid, lice-covered clothing and climb into the communal tub. The water is still warm, although there is filth floating on top, but Jack is still thankful. He was never offered a bath digging the tunnel for the Underground in London. After, he is issued clothing that passes for clean, and by the time Jack reaches his billet, he is crawling with lice again.

This passage again emphasizes the terrible living conditions of the men during the war. They are covered in constant filth and disease. Surprisingly, Jack finds something to appreciate in even these squalid conditions.

The next day, Stephen receives a letter from Jeanne in Amiens. Isabelle has left for Munich to be with Max (he was injured in enemy fire), but Jeanne has decided to stay in Amiens. She invites Stephen to visit the next time he is near.

Presumably, this is the first letter Stephen has received the entire war, underscoring his loneliness and the absence of love in his life.

Ellis stops by Stephen's dugout and tells him that he has ordered the men into a working party to bring back bodies for burial, but they have refused to go without him. Stephen suggests they all go. He orders Weir to come along and bring an extra man. Both Ellis and Weir are angry and don't want to go. "It's only death," Stephen says, as he entices Weir with rum.

Again, this passage serves to highlight the absolute horrors of the war and the mass number of casualties. They are literally surrounded by death, and this leads to a considerable amount of psychological stress and suffering.

The men sift through piles of dirt and miscellaneous body parts. One man named Brennan even uncovers the body of his brother. After they return, Weir asks Stephen if this is what his father has in mind when he says that the men are all "doing their bit." Stephen is just glad to be back—he was scared of finding one of them still alive. It's been known to happen, he says.

For Weir and Stephen, collecting dead bodies is all in a day's work, and this passage reflects this particularly bloody reality.

In the following days, Stephen arrives in Boulogne to catch a boat home to England for his forced leave. He stops and writes a letter to Jeanne, telling her that other than Weir, she is the only friend he has. He tears it up and instead sends her a short letter about his train ride to Boulogne.

Again, this emphasizes the emptiness of Stephen's life. Other than Stephen's letter to Isabelle and the letters he writes to the families of dead soldiers, this is the first personal letter Stephen has written during the war.

Once in England, Stephen realizes that he has nowhere to go, and in the end, he decides to head toward Norfolk, a place that Weir talks about occasionally. His first stop is to shop for clothes—most of what he had has been lost in transit from the Front. The attendant in the store looks at Stephen with disgust when he notices his uniform and rank, and can barely wait for him to conclude his business and leave.

The civilians treat Stephen badly because he is a soldier, representing the difficult homecoming of millions of men after the war. Men often returned disabled and traumatized, and they were frequently met with contempt and poor understanding of their conditions.

Stephen decides to take a walk through the English countryside. While walking aimlessly, he notices the early moon and the pale blue of the sky. He can see a cathedral in the distance, and alone in nature, Stephen feels a deep connection to all of creation. He is "overtaken by a climactic surge of feeling," and for the first time in years, Stephen does not feel numb.

Stephen believes that the war is a crime against nature, but he is metaphorically cleansed by the nature of the English countryside. This provides Stephen with a final push of optimism going into the final stages of the war.

Stephen heads back to France a day early so that he can visit Jeanne in Amiens. He arrives to the dark apartment and finds that in Isabelle's absence, the curtains have been opened and a brightness fills the rooms.

Now that Isabelle is gone, much of the darkness and pain is likewise gone from the apartment. By comparison, Jeanne is bright and unburdened, and the apartment now reflects this instead.


Stephen asks Jeanne if she will be returning home to Rouen now that Isabelle no longer needs her. Jeanne is undecided, but is "drawn to the idea of independence" from her father and family. She offers Stephen a drink.

Like Isabelle, Jeanne has been oppressed by her father's sexist ideals. It is expected that Jeanne will take care of her family; however, she would rather take care of herself.

Jeanne makes Stephen a nice meal, and as they eat she displays a "pleasant shyness." In her presence, Stephen feels a "sense of tranquility" and becomes quiet. "Can I come here again?" he asks. Jeanne tells Stephen that he is always welcome, and he begins to break down. "I can't do it. I'm so tired," he cries. "Don't make me go on." Jeanne holds him as he cries and encourages him to be strong.

In Jeanne, Stephen is finally finding the love and support that he needs in order to be a great soldier. Stephen breaks down in Jeanne's presence because her strength makes him feel vulnerable, and this is a marked difference from his relationship with Isabelle.


Back at the Front, Gray tells Stephen that his new appointment has been delayed and instead he will lead a raid on the enemy trenches. He is tasked with attacking the canal to the left so that the company can get a foothold. Stephen agrees. "Good man, Wraysford. Keep going. I knew you would," Gray says.

Just like his men, Stephen continues to endure, and Gray likewise finds this endearing. Ironically, he considers Stephen a "good man" because he continues to kill.


Meanwhile, Jack has finished digging and rests in a dugout. Since Shaw's death, Jack has begun to doodle pencil drawings of Stephen. He can't bring himself to sketch Shaw, and he can't "remember John's face well enough to draw it."

Jack is preoccupied with Stephen because he spared his life when he was court-martialed for sleeping at his sentry post. In this way, Jack owes his life to Stephen, and because of this Jack frequently thinks about him—especially in the absence created by John and Shaw's deaths.

As Stephen waits to launch the raid, Weir comes to visit him. As usual, Weir is upset and scared. He tells Stephen that he has a "foreboding." Stephen tries to change the subject, but Weir is persistent. He begins to talk about the last time Stephen read cards and Stephen cuts him off, yelling, "I fix the cards. I cheat."

Weir's "foreboding" is a harbinger of death. Stephen senses this as well, and this is why he becomes so angry. Stephen's extreme anger and overreaction to Weir's feelings are also a direct reflection of his love for Weir. Stephen becomes so angry precisely because he fears to lose his friend.

Weir is "startled and downcast," and he attempts to tell Stephen how important he has been to him during the war—just in case. Stephen responds angrily, shoving him to the ground. "Fuck off, Weir, fuck off out of my way and leave me alone," Stephen says, leaving Weir alone in the dugout.

Stephen can't bring himself to say goodbye to Weir. Stephen's love for Weir is largely what has kept him going through the war (other than his hate for the Germans), and if Stephen says goodbye, he will also have to admit his true feelings, which he is unable to do.

In the morning before the raid, breakfast comes to the trenches and Stephen is pleased to see bacon. The men quickly eat and prepare to enter No Man's Land.

Again, this harkens back to Bérard's belief that English folk eat meat daily, and it seems just as silly now.

The soldiers storm No Man's Land as the machine guns give them cover. The enemy begins to fire as well, and the men start to fall. Company B lends fire power, and Stephen and the soldiers are able to make it through a hole in the German wire. They jump into the trench full of German prisoners and quickly run underground. There is fighting throughout the trench.

This passage again shows the dangers of running through No Man's Land and the need for proper planning and communication. Had Stephen and his men found the German wire uncut, they would have been killed, just as many were on the previous raid.

Stephen looks across No Man's Land and doesn't see any troops. A platoon commander arrives and asks when reinforcements are arriving. "There are none," Stephen says. "They're not coming.

This passage again reflects Stephen's dire circumstances, and it drives home the hardships and terror of war.

Ellis begins to panic. With Company B gone, they are trapped on the German side of No Man's Land. "What do we *do*?" he cries. "We hold the line," Stephen replies, "we hold the fucking line." The fighting continues for hours until a new regiment regains control of the far trench.

This scene emphasizes Stephen's extraordinary bravery. He is consistently the only cool head in battle.

A commanding soldier approaches Stephen and orders him to withdraw. Something has gone wrong—another problem in planning. As the regiment covers their retreat, Ellis is killed by machine gun fire.

Proper planning seems like an obvious necessity, but the soldiers are treated like they are dispensable.

Later, at his new desk job, Stephen writes Ellis's mother and tells her of her son's bravery. Stephen has grown tired of writing letters.

These notices are almost the only letters Stephen writes.


Meanwhile, Jack and the other miners remain in the trenches. As Weir approaches them, Jack notices that the sandbags have not been properly placed. Before he is able to warn him, a sniper's bullet hits Weir in the head, and he falls dead, unaware of what has happened.

Of course, this passage is significant because it relays the death of Weir; however, it is also evidence of the miners' constant work. The artillery soldiers are resting in a billet, but Jack and the others are still in the trenches.

When word reaches Stephen of Weir's death, he is struck by a profound sadness. He thinks of the last time he spoke to Weir and the way he had treated him. Stephen had loved him; "Weir alone had made the war bearable."

Stephen begins to recognize his love for others, marking his greatest evolution as a character. Because of love, Stephen is able to make it through to the end of the war.


PART FIVE: ENGLAND 1978-79

It has been two months since Elizabeth gave the journal to Bob, and little progress has been made. She managed to find out which regiment her grandfather had been in but little else. She decides to drive to Buckinghamshire, where army headquarters are located.

This passage underscores the soldiers' and society's broader attempts to bury the painful stories of the past. Elizabeth must go to great lengths to learn about this part of history.


At army headquarters, Elizabeth is "met with suspicion." Most of the files are confidential and she has difficulty accessing them. An officer agrees to let Elizabeth see the regimental history, and she skims the documents for names, coming across a Colonel Gray.

The officer's "suspicions" and Elizabeth's difficulty accessing historical documents again shows how society has purposefully obscured this painful history.


Later that night, Elizabeth calls Bob and he suggests cross-referencing Gray's name in the *Who's Who?* If the Colonel was important or awarded medals, he is sure to be in the book, Bob says. After consulting the book, Elizabeth finds a number for a man in Lanarkshire. If he is still alive, he will be eighty-eight years old.

The Who's Who *is a British publication which identifies influential people in English society. Just as the title suggests, the publication tells Elizabeth only that Colonel Gray is an influential man, and like most historical records, it does not tell her why.*


Elizabeth's thoughts are interrupted by the telephone. It is Stuart and he has called for a chat. Distracted, Elizabeth rushes him off the line, but before she does, she invites him to dinner on Saturday night.

Elizabeth does not really want to have dinner with Stuart; she only invites him to placate him and get him off the phone. Stuart represents the modern patriarchy, and Elizabeth is not interested.

After she hangs up the phone, Elizabeth immediately picks it up again and dials the number in Scotland. She is struck with doubt and quickly hangs up, but after deciding it won't cause any harm, she dials again.

Elizabeth's assumption that her questions won't cause any harm is rather selfish. Of course, she could inadvertently open wounds calloused by time, and this passage draws attention to this.

When Gray comes on the line, he sounds annoyed. Elizabeth explains herself and her reason for calling, and he confirms that he remembers Captain Wraysford. Gray is reluctant to talk, but he tells Elizabeth that Stephen was a tall, superstitious man with dark hair. He was an orphan and quite "a strange man," he says. Gray remembers his "unbelievable nerve," and claims that "something worried him."

Gray is annoyed because, like Stephen, he has no desire to talk about the war. Surprisingly, this is still the most information Elizabeth has managed to obtain about her grandfather.

Elizabeth asks Gray if Captain Wraysford was kind, or funny, and if he got along well with the other men. Gray remembers that Wraysford never wanted to leave the front, and other than one man he befriended, he was a complete loner. She asks if he was a good soldier. Gray replies, "He was a terrific fighter, but that's not quite the same thing."

Gray's description of Stephen as a terrific fighter but not necessarily a good soldier is very telling. Even after all this time, Gray still believes that love is the foundation of a good soldier—something Stephen certainly struggled with.

Gray's wife interrupts Elizabeth's questions and insists that her husband rest. Elizabeth says she understands and begins to say goodbye, but Gray's wife interrupts again: "There's a man my husband used to write to. His name was Brennan. He was in a Star and Garter veterans' home in Southend."

Gray and Brennan represent the many forgotten war heroes of World War I. So much is owed to their sacrifice, yet they both fall into relative obscurity. In this way, Faulks continues to argue for the increased remembrance of war and those who endure it.

Elizabeth telephones the matron of the veterans' home and asks about Brennan. The woman tells Elizabeth that Brennan is a resident there but is "barely worth visiting." Elizabeth thanks her and promptly drives to the home.

Again, this emphasizes Brennan's obscurity and mistreatment as a returning soldier.

When Elizabeth arrives at the home, the matron tells her that Brennan has lived there for the last sixty years. He was badly injured during the last battle of the war—leading to an amputated leg—and he suffers from shellshock. He has no living family; his last visitor was his sister in 1949, and she died shortly after. The matron says that Brennan is "soft in the head."

Once again, it is shameful the way Brennan has been treated after his sacrifice. As a veteran suffering from shellshock, Brennan is not "soft in the head"—he is traumatized. In this vein, Faulks argues that all returning soldiers should be respected.

As Elizabeth approaches Brennan, he is seated in a wheelchair "like a **bird** on its perch." He glasses are kept together by tape. Elizabeth introduces herself, and sitting next to him, asks him about Captain Wraysford. "Such fireworks. We was all there, the whole street," he says.

Faulks's description of Brennan as "like a bird on its perch" is yet another reference to nature; however, this language also signifies the life that is still tragically trapped in Brennan's broken body.

Brennan is a world away, and Elizabeth sits with him quietly sipping tea. She decides to ask once more. "Captain Wraysford?" Suddenly, his voice "pipes up" as he says, "We all thought he was mad, that one. And the sapper with him. My mate Douglas, he was my mucker, he said, 'That man's strange.' But he held him when he died. They was all mad." Elizabeth sits with Brennan a bit longer and leaves.

Brennan is considered mad in his shell-shocked state; however, his short story suggests that the real insanity is the war itself. Brennan "pipes up" when Elizabeth asks about Stephen because he remembers him fondly. This suggests that Stephen's men truly did love and respect him after all.

The following day, Robert calls Elizabeth and tells her that he will unexpectedly be at his flat in London that night—and his family will be gone. "Of course I'm free," she says. They make plans to meet at eight.

This passage again reflects Elizabeth's life of waiting because of the complicated nature of her relationship with a married man.

That night, Robert tries to remove the obvious signs of his family from the apartment; however, since they live there, not much can be done. He feels guilty—he always does—but his relationship with Elizabeth isn't just some "lighthearted sideshow." He deeply loves her, and, unfortunately, he "married the wrong woman."

Robert also disrupts popular gender stereotypes. Men often have extramarital affairs that are simply "lighthearted sideshows," but Robert's love for Elizabeth and his constant concern for his children makes him appear more emotional and sensitive.

Elizabeth and Robert share a quiet and comfortable dinner. They spend a "night of enclosed harmony without discussing the difficult decisions that awaited them." In the morning, Elizabeth leaves "with a light step."

This quiet and comfortable night is evidence of Elizabeth and Robert's love. Their relationship is complicated, yet when they are together, this is easy to forget.

On Saturday, Françoise calls and tells Elizabeth that she has found twenty more notebooks in the attic. Elizabeth excitedly tells her mother that she has "nothing to do this evening," and promptly runs to get them.

The additional notebooks that Françoise finds represent the amount of information that has been suppressed concerning the war. Elizabeth has only just begun to uncover her history—it will take much more work.

Back at home, Elizabeth lights a fire, starts a bath, and opens the first journal. Suddenly, the intercom sounds. It is Stuart. She has forgotten that she invited him to dinner.

Elizabeth easily forgets about Stuart, showing her ultimate indifference to him.

Elizabeth opens the door and Stuart hands her a bottle of wine. She tells him she is running late and is in the tub. She quickly dresses and, telling him she forgot the pasta earlier at the market, Elizabeth runs out the door to pick something up for dinner.

Even though Elizabeth doesn't really care for Stuart, she still doesn't want to hurt his feelings.

In the doorway, Stuart picks up an old belt buckle engraved with *Gott mit uns*, or as Stuart translates, "God with us." Elizabeth doesn't want to tell Stuart about the notebooks. "Just something I got in a junk shop," she says, leaving him in the doorway.

Stuart's German skills have the effect of making him seem even more pretentious and self-important. Elizabeth clearly doesn't feel close to him, as she doesn't want to tell him about the notebooks.

After dinner, Stuart puts on a record and asks Elizabeth to sit down. He tells her a story about a pretty girl who avoids getting married all her adult life until it is too late. And then, Stuart proposes to her.

This interaction further highlights Stuart's self-importance. As a man, he presumes to know what is missing in Elizabeth's life—and he believes that he *is what is missing.*

Elizabeth is shocked. "I actually have a boyfriend," she says. Stuart tells her that Robert will never leave his wife. He assumes that she is hesitant to marry him because they have not yet had sex. "Do you want a trial run?" he asks.

The way Stuart talks to Elizabeth is degrading.

Elizabeth is mortified. As Stuart goes to leave, he turns to her and says, "I've planted the seed. You just do me the favour of watering it from time to time. Think about it." Elizabeth says she will think about it.

Incredibly, Stuart still thinks that he has a chance with Elizabeth.

Elizabeth is "in a condition of shock" for days after. The New Year comes, and she resolves to visit Brennan more. She takes him cake and whiskey, and just sits and drinks tea with him. Elizabeth asks him questions, but his answers are random and disconnected.

Through Elizabeth's relationship with Brennan, Faulks argues for the improved treatment of war veterans. Elizabeth's efforts are minimal, but she still manages to bring him some small measure of joy.


Elizabeth realizes that she has not had her period since December 6, and today is January 21. She takes a pregnancy test, and not only is it positive, it is "bursting with life."

Elizabeth's pregnancy is itself symbolic of life and hope for the future.

Elizabeth tries to call Robert, but he doesn't answer. Soon, her phone rings and Bob tells her that he has cracked the code. "Greek letters, French language, and bit of private code," he says. He has mailed the journal back to her—it should be there in the morning. Elizabeth thanks him and makes plans to drop off the twenty new journals the next weekend.

With twenty more journals, Bob and Elizabeth have their work cut out for them. This further highlights the level of historical suppression regarding World War I.


In the morning, Elizabeth is finally able to read her grandfather's journal. Bob has neatly translated it, and she easily reads over it. Stephen talks of his guilt for surviving when so many others have not, and he talks of "the anger and the blood." She reads, "No child or future generation will ever know what this was like. […] When it is over we will go quietly among the living and we will not tell them." He goes on, "We will seal what we have seen in the silence of our hearts and no words will reach us."

Stephen's journals represent his own attempts to conceal his painful past, and society's broader efforts to obscure the violent and painful history of the war. While the war is undoubtedly a source of pain for Stephen, Faulks argues that future generations must be aware of previous sacrifices, even if they are unlikely to understand them.

PART SIX: FRANCE 1918

Stephen tries to write in his journal, but it is all a "nightmare." He picks up a magazine, and when that fails to keep his attention, he walks out to the garden of the house he is billeted in. Stephen notes the sky and the pebbles under his feet. In the distance, he hears the constant and steady sound of gunfire "rumbling like a train through an embankment."

Faulks's use of the word "nightmare" reinforces the terrible nature of Stephen's story and underscores his desire to keep it a secret.

The next day, Stephen goes to see Colonel Gray at headquarters. Gray looks unaffected by the war, and he asks Stephen if he is having fun with his "wee maps and lists." "We…exist," Stephen says, reminding Gray that he never requested to be an office worker. Gray tells Stephen that he is going back to the front line. There will soon be an attack.

Stephen is miserable in his office job. He misses his men, showing his growing love for them. Stephen is slowly becoming the soldier that Gray believed he could be.

Gray asks Stephen what he thinks will be put on the memorial when the war is over. Stephen says he doesn't know, but perhaps a list of actions. "It's a proud list," Gray says. Stephen, however isn't proud. He feels "no pride in the unspeakable names."

This interaction underscores Stephen's shame. Ironically, this future memorial is the same monument that Elizabeth visits in 1978. She doesn't feel a sense of pride there either.

As Stephen leaves headquarters, Gray tells him to think about the memorial. He tells him to think of the places they have fought, and the blood that was spilled. The names of those "stinking towns and foul bloody villages whose names will be turned into some bogus glory by fat-arsed historians who have sat in London. We were there." Gray tells Stephen he hates the names too. The only words he cares about are the words that will be chiseled at the bottom. The words everyone will remember: "Final advance and pursuit." Gray says, "Don't tell me you don't want to put your name to those words." Stephen agrees that he does.

Gray's words highlight the inaccuracy, or at least the superficial nature, of historical documents about the war. After all, the "fat-arsed historians" know nothing about the true suffering of war, and like Weir's parents, they are informed by second-hand accounts like newspapers. Gray's words also reflect his desire to survive no matter the cost..

Before going back to the front line, Stephen takes a few days to go to Rouen. Amiens has become too dangerous, and Jeanne has relocated until it is safe to return. Sitting in her small flat, Jeanne thinks that Stephen doesn't resemble the man her sister had described to her. This thought comforts her and makes her desires easier to accept.

Again, this passage stresses the danger to civilians during the war. The war is the cause of homelessness and displacement for many people, and the danger in Amiens emphasizes this.

Jeanne tells Stephen about the German advance on Amiens. She didn't want to leave, but she was forced. Jeanne admits that she hasn't told her parents she is in town. By now, she says, her parents have "given up hope in their daughters" anyway.

To Jeanne, returning to Rouen is similar to returning to the oppressive state of her father's home. The fact that Jeanne does not tell her parents that she is town is proof of her determination to be independent.

Bérard sent her father a letter telling him about Isabelle and Max, Jeanne says, and when she wrote Isabelle, she wasn't surprised to hear it. According to Isabelle, when the Germans occupied Amiens, Bérard figured they would be there for the duration of the war. He offered the commandant his house, and when the troops pulled out after a few days, he was branded a coward and traitor. Now, he tries to "make up for it by making very belligerent noises."

This passage reflects Bérard's true vile and sexist nature. He is intent on destroying Isabelle, even when she is long gone. René is also gone and presumably dead, and Bérard has nothing to gain by causing Isabelle increased pain. Still, Bérard attempts to secure his own power at Isabelle's expense.

Jeanne tells Stephen that Max is not well and that he has had to have his leg amputated. "You mustn't let yourself go," she says. "It's nearly over." As she continues to encourage and support Stephen, he asks her why she is so good to him. "Because I love you," she says.

Notably, Jeanne encourages Stephen to find strength in her love for him. This is in contrast to Isabelle, who earlier in the novel encouraged Stephen to find strength in his own love for her. This is evidence of Jeanne's true love for Stephen, and proof that Isabelle never really returned the love that Stephen gave her.

Jeanne and Stephen go out for dinner, and afterward, they sit in the garden drinking brandy. They dream about after the war. They talk of singing and dancing, and drink until Jeanne feels dizzy.

The garden is symbolic of life and nature in the face of the war, but it is also a reflection of their hope for a better life after the war.

Later, Jeanne undresses in her bedroom. She walks naked across the room to get her robe. As she reaches for it hanging on the back of the door, Stephen opens it. He is looking for the bathroom. Jeanne moves to cover herself but instead invites him inside.

Again, this interaction disrupts typical gender stereotypes. Jeanne is not modest, and acts on her desires.


"Let me hold you," Jeanne says. Stephen walks into her arms and puts his own arms around her thighs. He lays his face between her legs and begins to weep. "Isabelle," he cries. "Isabelle."

Sadly, Stephen does not love Jeanne in the same way that he loves Isabelle. She was his first and greatest love, even though she broke his heart.

When Stephen returns to the front line, the man who has taken Weir's position with the miners asks him to go in the tunnels. His men must enlarge the listening post, but they can hear the enemy above them. Stephen agrees to go, provided he is not gone for more than an hour.

The new captain only makes Stephen miss Weir more. Stephen's request to not be gone for long foreshadows the many days that he will be trapped underground.


Later, Stephen crawls into the tunnel behind Jack Firebrace and two other men. They soon meet up with two other infantry men, and the three miners lead the way. Jack winds them through the deep tunnel system, and Stephen notes the other men growing uncomfortable. One of the men hears something, and they all flatten themselves on the ground in silence.

This scene mirrors the first time Stephen and Jack met and went underground together. Of course, all of the men who now go underground with them are new recruits, and this again highlights the high number of casualties during the war.

A miner takes out a stethoscope and listens. He motions for Jack to come listen too, and he closes his eyes in concentration. Jack confirms footsteps moving back toward the German line, about ten feet up. "Retreating?" asks the man. Jack confirms, "But they could have laid a charge," he says.

This passage again emphasizes how difficult Jack's job is. Armed with only a stethoscope, it is impossible to know why the Germans are retreating.

The miner suggests waiting five minutes, and just as Stephen protests, the tunnel blows up. As Stephen lays on the floor in the midst of the fallen earth and rock, he can tell that he is not seriously injured. He begins looking for survivors and finds movement beneath the rubble. He begins to dig. After an hour, he begins to make progress.

It is miraculous that Stephen continues to survive. Like the randomness of his superstitious game, there is no rhyme or reason to why Stephen has survived while so many others have died.

Jack can hear Stephen unearthing him, but he can feel his legs crushed under a large beam. He moves his head violently side to side, trying keep himself alert. Finally, Stephen uncovers him.

This passage highlights the dire situation that Jack is in. Even if Stephen does manage to find him, it seems unlikely that he will live.

"What happened?" Stephen asks. Jack tells him the Germans blew a charge right above them. They probably know where they are. There may be more. For now, he can't move his legs—they remain buried under wood and dirt. Stephen keeps digging. His own arm is clearly broken, and he furiously moves dirt with one hand.

This underscores Stephen's own bravery and endurance. Of course, it would be easier to save himself, but Stephen is determined to free Jack even if it costs him his own life.

Stephen works for five hours trying to free Jack before he must take a rest. He falls asleep on Jack's chest just as another explosion rocks the tunnel. Jack tells Stephen that the chances of a rescue party reaching them are very low, and now, with the second explosion, he will be unable to get back.

This again emphasizes the dire state of their situation and Stephen's exhaustion. Stephen must work though unimaginable odds for a chance to live.

Stephen frees Jack and begins making his way down the tunnel that Jack has identified as the exit. He is only able to make it a few yards at a time—Jack's weight and his own broken arm make movement difficult. After about an hour of painful movement, Stephen hits a wall. "You've brought us the wrong fucking way," he says. This is not the end, however, only where the second bomb went off. "We're about twenty yards short of the main gallery," Jack says.

This passage highlights Jack's importance during the war. Faulks has already established that the miners are not typically treated well by the infantry soldiers, yet it is their knowledge and hard work that helps to win the war. After all, Stephen wouldn't even know how to get out of the tunnel without Jack's help.

Stephen and Jack stay in the tunnel for nearly an hour. If they don't do something, Stephen thinks, Jack will die of his injuries and he of thirst. Jack asks Stephen if he is afraid to die. "I think so," he says. Jack finds it ironic that of all the men, he's going to die here with Stephen, who, for the first time, tells him his name. "Shall I call you that?" Jack asks. Stephen says yes.

As a man and a soldier, Stephen is supposed to be brave at all times, and while this is true much of the time, he still feels profound fear and openly admits it.

Stephen asks Jack who he would like to die with. "Which human being out of all those you have met would you choose to hold your hand, to hold close to you in the beginning of eternity?" Stephen asks. Jack clarifies, "To be with, like that, always, do you mean?" Stephen answers yes, and Jack immediately says John. He tells Stephen about his son, his great love for him, and the sadness he feels in his death.

Again, this is evidence of Jack's undying love for John. Even as he dies, Jack continues to find strength in his love for his son.

"You talk almost as though you had fallen in love," Stephen tells Jack. Jack explains how he did. Stephen tells him to hold on. After he gets him out, Stephen says, he can have more children. "No," says Jack. Margaret is too old. "Then I will have them for you," Stephen says.

This passage is significant because this interaction is why Elizabeth names her own son John. She honors Stephen's promise, and her future son is symbolic of the hope for a better future.

Jack asks Stephen if he would choose to die next to him. Stephen tells Jack he "will do very well," but the only time he has felt the kind of love that Jack speaks of was with a woman. "Not your own flesh and blood?" Jack asks. "I think she was my own flesh and blood. I truly believe she was," Stephen says. Stephen considers giving up, but Jack urges him on. At least, he says, it will give you something to do.

Once again, this conversation highlights Stephen's love for Isabelle. Notably, Stephen's love for Isabelle does not sustain him in quite the same way that Jack's does. Stephen considers giving up, and a dying man must urge him on.

Jack begins to tremble so badly that Stephen is unable to carry him, and he resigns himself to death. Stephen is certain that death is near too, and he hears Jack begin to moan and call to his mother.

Jack's calls to his mother highlight the pain of war, and mirror Stephen's own calls earlier in the novel.

Stephen falls asleep, and when he wakes, he reaches out into the darkness. He feels something solid and thinks it's a body, but it is a sandbag. The entire wall appears to be made out of sandbags. Stephen wakes Jack to ask him why there are sandbags here—they seem out of place—but Jack is delirious and thinks he's in London building the underground railway.

The underground railway that Faulks references in Jack's delirium is the same railway that Elizabeth impatiently rides in 1978. This is another example of the presence of the past in future generations.

Jack, suddenly becoming lucid, tells Stephen that the New Zealanders lay sandbags differently than the Englishmen, and that there may be explosives behind the bags. "Could we blow it?" Stephen asks. Jack isn't so sure, although it is possible. "I just want to die in peace," he says.

Despite that fact that Stephen is an infantry soldier and outranks Jack, Jack is an integral part of British army's success during the war.

Stephen talks to Jack as he digs, trying to keep him alive. After hours of work, he finds several stacked boxes of explosives behind the sandbags. He wakes Jack and tells him of his discovery. Stephen sees over two hundred boxes and Jack laughs. "That's ten thousand pounds. It takes one pound to blow up the Mansion House." Stephen decides to move the boxes and asks Jack to help him. When he says he can't, Stephen says, "I know. Just encourage me. Tell me it can be done." Jack nods. "You're mad enough," he says.

Stephen finds a massive number of explosives buried in the tunnel, and this puts the scale of the war into perspective. Stephen is trapped in one portion of one tunnel—one of hundreds of tunnels. All in all, the trenches dug by Jack and the other miners during World War I stretched over 440 miles across the French terrain.

After Jack explains how to blow the explosives, Stephen carries him down the fighting tunnel and out of the way of the blast. He takes a box of ammonal and empties it in a bag, which he then carries to the chamber and empties against the guncotton primer that sits on the only remaining box of explosives. He fills the bag three separate times and empties more ammonal. He lights the fuse. It travels a way and fizzles. Just as he is convinced that it won't work, it blows in a deafening explosion.

It is truly amazing that Stephen is capable of this amount of work considering the shape he is in. Stephen is broken, both physically and mentally, and he is slowly dying of thirst. Stephen notes earlier in the novel that there is no limit to what the soldiers will endure, and he is further proof of this opinion.

In a German dugout, Lieutenant Levi feels the blast. Another officer approaches him and orders him down into the hole to check out the damage. Levi is a doctor back in Hamburg, and there are three men underground.

As Stephen's German enemy, the character of Levi has been heavily vilified. However, the fact that Levi is a doctor during peacetime suggests that he is not an inherently destructive figure.

As they walk along the underground tunnel, Levi and the men come across substantial blockage. Levi suspects that his own brother was in the tunnel when it blew, and he is desperate to find him. As they work their way forward, they debate the cause of the blast. The wonder if it was an accident—undetonated explosives are unstable, after all.

Considering the amount of explosives Stephen has found hidden in the tunnels, undetonated explosives are a serious risk. This makes going into the tunnels all the more dangerous and terrifying.

In the meantime, Stephen wakes up underground. There is no light but there is some air, and he tries to wake Jack. When Jack doesn't respond, Stephen begins to yell. "Do you hate the Germans? Do you hate everything about them and their country?" Jack doesn't move.

Here, Stephen summons what is left of his hate to try to survive. Of course, Stephen cannot sustain Jack with his hate, and this furthers Faulks's argument of the power of love over hate.

In the course of digging, Stephen has lost most of his clothes and his revolver. If he wants to kill himself now, he will have to use his knife. Stephen begins to beg Jack. "You have to want to live. You must believe." Quietly, Jack says he doesn't want to live. Stephen asks him if he wants to see them win the war. "No one can win," Jack says.

Jack's death stresses the senselessness of war. For Jack, it doesn't matter who wins the war. The death that surrounds him means that they have already lost. Jack finds it impossible to live in a world without John, and with this much hate and ugliness—it is incompatible with the love that has sustained him this far.

The Germans' controlled explosion blows a hole large enough for them to go through, and Levi and the others move on. They come upon a second hole and one of the men climbs inside to check it out. He finds a body inside, and when he can't dislodge it, he removes a watch from the man's wrist and climbs out.

The Germans must work for hours and set off additional explosions in order to find their missing men, and this puts the size of Stephen's own blast into perspective.

Out of the hole, he hands the watch to Levi, who recognizes it as his brother's—a present from their father on his bar mitzvah. "Silly boy," Levi says. "So near the end."

The fact that Levi's brother nearly makes it to the end of the war makes his death seem even worse. Levi's description of his brother as a "silly boy" makes him seem like a child who really didn't know any better.

The Germans stop to eat. Levi's religion will not allow him to eat the food, so instead he prays. After eating, the men continue to dig.

Similar to Stephen's superstitious card game, Levi searches for the meaning of war within his Jewish religion.

Entombed in the darkness, Stephen figures that they have been trapped for five or six days. He yells out to Jack, who is awake and lucid. He tells Stephen that he is thankful for his last parcel of socks—they are a great cushion for his head here in the tunnel. Stephen tells him that he never received a parcel during the war. "You poor bugger," Jack says. "You've worn army socks all the way through?" Jack laughs a slight laugh, coughs, and dies. Stephen is "bitterly alone." He keeps striking his knife on the wall.

Jack's assessment that Stephen is a "poor bugger" is right on. While Jack's dying words seem ridiculous and more indicative of his disorientation, they do hint at a greater truth. Stephen isn't a "poor bugger" because has only army socks; the great tragedy of Stephen's life is that he is "bitterly alone," just as Faulks describes him in the tunnel.


After four hours of digging, the Germans make little progress. Suddenly, Levi hears a tapping sound. "There's definitely somebody trapped back there," he says. They get ready to blow it again, and one of the men asks Levi what he will do if the enemy is behind the wall. "Then it would be the man who killed my brother," he says. The men assume he wants revenge, but he corrects them. "My faith provides me with guidance for anything. I am not afraid to meet him, though, if that's what you mean. I should know what to do."

Levi serves as a foil to Stephen. Levi is not filled with hate and contempt for his enemy like Stephen is. Even though Stephen is technically responsible for his brother's death, Levi still does not hate him. Furthermore, Levi is confident that he will do the right thing when he meets whomever is on the other side of the dirt. This is also unlike Stephen and his "quick temper" that often gets him into trouble.


Levi orders the men to keep going and they finally break through. Stephen's tapping echoes, and Levi accidentally goes in the wrong direction but eventually doubles back. Stephen begins to see his rescuer, and he is wearing a German uniform. As Levi looks at Stephen, who seems "wild-eyed" and "half-demented," the men fall into each other's arms, "weeping at the bitter strangeness of their human lives."

Presumably, had Stephen embraced hate in the moment he is rescued instead of love, this ending would play out much differently. Ironically, now that Stephen refuses to fight, he finally becomes a great soldier.


The men climb out of the tunnel together into the German trench to the sounds of **birds**. In English, Stephen asks Levi if it is over. Levi answers in English: "It is finished." He looks around the German trench and down toward No Man's Land. As Stephen's lip begins to tremble, he lays his head on Levi's chest and sobs.

The birds again represent nature's indifference to the war and humankind, but they also symbolize optimism. The war has ended, and No Man's Land is quiet.

The men bring up the bodies of Jack and Levi's brother, and bury them in a shared grave. That night, they eat out in the open air and Stephen says he must head back to the British side. Before he leaves, Levi gives him the buckle from his belt as a souvenir. It is engraved and reads *Gott mit uns*. The men embrace one last time and Stephen walks across the quiet of No Man's Land.

This passage solves the mystery of the belt buckle that Elizabeth finds in Stephen's old belongings. The fact that Stephen saves the buckle is proof of its value and significance in his own life, and it has likewise become important to Elizabeth.

PART SEVEN: ENGLAND 1979

Elizabeth is nervous to tell her mother she is pregnant. She has already told Erich and Irene, and they both reacted badly. Erich took her pregnancy personally on behalf of his son, whom she would clearly not be marrying. Even Irene acts angrily.

Like countless others, Elizabeth assumes that her mother will be disappointed that she is having a child out of wedlock.

When asked who the father is, Elizabeth refuses to tell and says it's "a secret." She has finished reading her grandfather's journals and has a clearer sense of what the war was like. She is confused over one entry, though. Stephen wrote about being trapped with a man named Jack who has a son called John, and in the exchange he writes, "I said I would have his." Elizabeth is perplexed.

Elizabeth's secrecy about her baby's father mirrors Isabelle's own secrecy regarding Françoise. Her grandmother's story helps her to better understand her own circumstances.

Elizabeth reads about her grandmother, Jeanne, in the journals, and notes that her grandfather refers to her as "kind" and "gentle." There is not passion in his words.

This passage is proof of Stephen's undying love for Isabelle. While he undoubtedly loved Jeanne, he loved her in a different way.

Thinking about her grandmother, Elizabeth becomes confused again. Jeanne was born in 1878, and while she's not exactly sure when Françoise was born, with her own birth being in 1940, she can't seem to make the dates add up. Elizabeth can't find an answer and quickly abandons her train of thought.

Elizabeth senses that she doesn't quite know the whole story yet, and this makes it all the more powerful when she does discover her full history and truth.

On Saturday, Elizabeth meets her mother for dinner, and surprisingly, Françoise is pleased about Elizabeth's pregnancy. She tells her mother that she was worried she would be angry. After all, she's not married. Françoise doesn't ask about the baby's father and Elizabeth doesn't tell her. "Does it matter?" Françoise asks. "I don't think it does," answers Elizabeth.

The fact that Elizabeth doesn't think the identity of her baby's father matters is further proof of her independence and self-reliance. Popular expectations of women in society assume that Elizabeth can't do this alone, but she feels otherwise.

Françoise tells Elizabeth that her own mother was not married to her father. She then tells her that Jeanne is not her real grandmother. She has wanted to tell her over the years, but didn't see the need. She tells Elizabeth that Jeanne, the woman she knew as her grandmother, didn't marry her father until 1919, when Françoise was already seven years old.

Elizabeth's life again mirrors Isabelle's, and this is yet another connection to her past. In this passage, Faulks also continues his argument for the power of love—Françoise didn't see the need to tell Elizabeth the truth because their love transcends the biology of birth.

Elizabeth isn't surprised; she knew that the dates didn't add up. Françoise asks if there is a woman named Isabelle in the journals. Yes, says Elizabeth, "an old girlfriend." Françoise tells her that Isabelle, Jeanne's younger sister, was her real mother. She had died right after the war in the flu epidemic, and Françoise was sent to live with Jeanne and Stephen—that is the first he learned of his child.

Elizabeth doesn't know the whole story of her history until she talks to her mother. Her grandfather's journals, even the twenty she has yet to decode, will only take her so far. Elizabeth can't expect to gather her entire history from one place or source.

Françoise asks Elizabeth if she is angry, and while she says it may take some "time to digest it," it doesn't bother her. She asks her mother about Stephen. Françoise tells her that he didn't speak for two years after the war, and even after that, he was quiet. "He never really recovered," she says. He died at forty-eight, just a couple of years before Elizabeth's birth.

Society expects Elizabeth to be angry with her mother, but she doesn't let the truth of her biological history affect her love for her family. Stephen survived the war, but was clearly left deeply scarred by his experiences.

Elizabeth visits the prenatal clinic and learns that first labors take hours. She can feel the child growing and moving inside her, and Robert manages to come and stay with her the week before her due date. He rents them a cottage near Dorset so that Elizabeth can relax before giving birth.

Elizabeth's false belief that her birth will take hours foreshadows her emergency birth at the cottage. Robert's effort to be near Elizabeth and make her comfortable is further proof of his love for her.

Robert is worried that she will go into labor, but Elizabeth calms his fears. First babies are almost never early, she says, and they still have eight days. As Robert runs out to the market, Elizabeth begins to feel pains. She waits for the cramping to pass, and she doesn't tell Robert.

Just like Isabelle, Elizabeth keeps the physical aspects of her pregnancy from Robert. To the two women, these moments should be kept private, even "from the men who caused them." This process uniquely belongs to the women.

The pain continues, and Robert insists on calling the doctor. Elizabeth protests, but the pain continues to worsen. Robert sees blood pouring from between her legs and they both know she is in labor. Robert holds her and encourages her to push when she feels it is right. He can see the head now, followed by the shoulders. Elizabeth screams one last time and pushes the baby out into Robert's hands.

Notably, Robert does not try to command the situation or tell Elizabeth what to do, and in this way he is completely different from most of the other male characters in the novel. This behavior inspires some optimism for the future.

The doctor arrives just in time to cut the cord, and a baby boy is placed in Elizabeth's arms. She tells Robert that she wants to name him John, "a promise made by her grandfather."

When Elizabeth names of her son John, Faulks implies that the past is alive in the present, as she fulfills a promise made decades before. John himself then represents the hope of a better future.

Robert walks out into the sunshine. He can feel his spirit in his body, and he bends over to pick up a chestnut. He has waited for this day since he was a boy himself, and now there is John, "his boy, another chance." Robert throws the chestnut into the air in his "great happiness," and a **crow** is disturbed in a nearby tree. The bird flies out of the tree, "its harsh, ambiguous call coming back in long, grating waves toward the earth, to be heard by those still living."

This final birdsong symbolizes optimism; however, this hopefulness is somewhat guarded. Crows also often symbolize death and bad luck, and this harkens back to the unspeakable violence that humankind is capable of. Ultimately, Faulks argues that future generations must remember all that the war entails—even the tragedy.

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