

## Before the war

Look at the extract below which is from 'Part One: France 1910':

The gardens were formed by the backwaters of the Somme, which had been channeled between numerous small islands whose banks were secured with wooden plank revetting. The land was intensely cultivated for vegetables, either in small plots, where the owner lived in a simple house on the site, or in larger areas whose farmer was likely to live in town. ...

... The stagnant water, unmoved by any breeze, seemed to emphasize the unnatural heat of the day. ...

With lunch over, the afternoon lay heavy and dull on them. They clambered back into the boat ... The temperature had increased and the women fanned themselves vigorously. Madame Bérard, in thick formal clothes, looked disconsolate at the front of the boat, like a brooding figurehead on an ill-fated ship headed for ice and equatorial winds.

Stephen felt hot and thickheaded from the wine. He was repelled by the water-gardens: their hectic abundance seemed to him close to the vegetable fertility of death. The brown waters were murky and shot through with the scurrying of rats from the banks where the earth had been dug out of trenches and held back by elaborate wooden boarding. Heavy flies hung over the water, beneath the trees, dipping into the rotting tops of cabbages, asparagus and artichokes that had been left unpicked in their reckless prodigality. What was held to be a place of natural beauty was a stagnation of living tissue which could not be saved from decay.

From: pp.35-37, Vintage edition (published 1994), © Sebastian Faulks

Now read Rupert Brooke's sonnet, 'Peace' (written during the War in 1914):

Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour,  
 And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping,  
 With hand made sure, clear eye, and sharpened power,  
 To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping,  
 Glad from a world grown old and cold and weary,  
 Leave the sick hearts that honour could not move,  
 And half-men, and their dirty songs and dreary,  
 And all the little emptiness of love!  
 Oh! we, who have known shame, we have found release there,  
 Where there's no ill, no grief, but sleep has mending,  
 Naught broken save this body, lost but breath;  
 Nothing to shake the laughing heart's long peace there  
 But only agony, and that has ending;  
 And the worst friend and enemy is but Death.

1. This part of Faulk's novel is set four years before the First World War; why do you think Faulks chose to set this part around the Somme where Stephen later returns during the war?
2. How does Faulks show that the characters move slowly and without energy? Why do you think he portrays them in this way? Look at Brooke's sonnet for ideas. Think about the characters' behavior both on this expedition and at other points during the first part of the novel; are they all 'good' characters, all 'bad' or a mixture. What do you think Faulks might be trying to imply?
3. What sort of impression do the references to the stagnant and still water give to the place? Again, refer to Brooke's sonnet and how he uses the image of water: what does he suggest has happened to those taking part in the War?
4. Madame Bérard is described as wearing 'thick formal clothes'; in what way is this similar to the outfits worn by the soldiers and the way they feel?
5. How does Faulks hint at the death and decay that is to happen on the Somme during the war? Pick out particular words and phrases; why does he choose these for his description?
6. What does the sentence, 'The brown waters were murky and shot through with the scurrying of rats from the banks where the earth had been dug out of trenches and held back by elaborate wooden boarding,' remind you of and why has Faulks used this description?
7. Why is the abundance of rotting vegetables here ironic?
8. Overall, how does Faulks mirror what is to happen to the area during the war in this description and how is the extract from his novel similar to Brooke's sonnet?