

Weir's visit home

Read the extract from the novel in which Weir returns to his parents' house in Leamington Spa for leave. In the Vintage edition of the novel it is from pp.228-231 and begins, 'Weir had been on leave to England ...' and ends, 'He went out into the garden and sat on a bench where he lit a cigarette and raised the bottle in his trembling hand.' This is from 'Part Four: France 1917' so it is after the men have participated in some horrific battles with hundreds of thousands of casualties.

1. Why do you think Faulks has Weir's parents living in a Victorian villa? Why is it mentioned?
2. Why does Weir ring the front door bell? What does this tell us about his upbringing and how he feels about being back?
3. Weir's parents have a maid. What does this imply about their social status?
4. Faulks describes the garden, where Weir is directed, in great detail, 'There was a large flat lawn with laurel bushes and a giant cedar in one corner. He saw the gnats in the damp air ahead of him and felt his boots sink into the short-cropped lawn. The packed grass gave luxurious support to his steps. The air was thick with garden scents of evening.' Discuss the contrasts Faulks is drawing attention to here; think about: well-kept lawns take a lot of care; the garden is 'alive' with plants and animals; everything seems very neat.
5. What is surprising about the way Weir's father responds when he hears Weir's voice?
6. Why do you think Faulks has Weir's father in this position, feeding a toad? Think about what toads look like and how they eat things. Is it a pleasant image?
7. What is ironic about the image of Weir's father feeding the toad insects that he has caught? Think back to the descriptions of battle in which the ordinary soldiers had no choice about being sent into battle and the way in which they were killed.
8. Discuss the significance of Weir's conversation with his father as they cross the lawn. Think in particular about his father's apparent lack of emotion at seeing his son; what his father is wearing; where his mother is.
9. Why do you think Faulks has Weir looking out of the window after his bath, when he is waiting for 'the familiar wash of normality'?
10. What do Weir's mother's initial questions and behaviour tell us about their relationship and about the time in which the novel is set?
11. What does the stilted conversation between the two men, after Weir's mother goes to bed, suggest to you? Why does Faulks have Weir's father react with such a lack of understanding and even cut off Weir when he tries to explain what has happened? Do you think Faulks is implying they have a difficult relationship or is it more complex and tied up with the time in which the men lived?
12. What do Weir's actions at the end, when he takes the sherry and drinks from the bottle, show us? Why does he wait until his parents have gone to bed? Why does Faulks finish the scene here?