



A-level

ENGLISH LITERATURE A

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

June 2025

Insert

Extract from *Covenant with Death* by John Harris, published in 1961

All around us, in every field and orchard, in every village and by every roadside, the final preparations were taking place. Thousands of other men had put their kits together too, and hundreds of harassed officers had checked their lists for the last time. The final loads of ammunition had arrived and the last few men and horses. The last few batteries had rattled into position, digging their pits hurriedly and searching out their observation posts.

It was here. The end of all our training, the moment to which we'd all dedicated our lives for the past two years, the end of all frustrations, doubts and sorrows. Battle. The Big Push.

Beyond the hills, the bombardment was still continuing, rattling and muttering over the valleys like the flutterings of gigantic wings, like some iron monster that would soon snatch all these thousands of well-trained men – the heroes, the cowards, the fainthearts and the strong together – all the guns, all the animals, all the machinery, and fling them into the final holocaust that would end the war.

The offensive seemed to have rolled itself together like some tremendous beast about to spring.

The concert ended on an emotional note. Inevitably the famous speech from *Richard II* had to be quoted and inevitably it had to be Murray who chose to do it.

There was a storm of cheers and jeers when he announced his intention but, as he plodded solemnly through it, the shouting died.

'This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
This other Eden, demi-paradise...
...this blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England.'

His firm, sincere young voice carried clearly in the still air and the laughter had gone completely from the faces of his audience by the time he finished.

Without any suggestion from anyone we started to sing '*God Save the King*', and I remembered that other occasion I'd sung it like this, on the night before I joined up. It seemed a lifetime away now, but the rough, strong voices in the open air had the same overwhelming effect on me, and I felt proud and sad, and glad I was there.

Death wasn't very far away over the hill that night and the savour of life seemed twice as powerful. Emotion was strong in all of us as we were confronted with the substance of life and the pre-eminence of death. We were the chosen people, poised on a lofty height, and the tendency to be tolerant with the sentimental, even with the would-be heroic, was strong.

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