

Siegfried Sassoon

(1886-1967)



The Conquered Trenches of Perthes, 1916, by Francois Flameng.

The writer and his work. Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967) was born in Kent, and was educated at a prestigious English public school and then at Cambridge. From a rich Jewish family, he lived the life of a writer and a country gentleman before he suddenly found himself in the middle of the crude life of the trenches – the contrast is memorably described in his prose works, *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* (1928) and *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930). For his courage in the Somme offensive of July 1916 he was awarded the Military Cross, but when he was wounded and hospitalized in Britain he refused to go back to the front and denounced the war's horrors as being deliberately prolonged by the Establishment on both sides. He eventually returned to the front but was wounded again and sent home as an invalid. Sassoon's war poetry shows both his great courage and his **hatred of war**. It is bitterly **ironic**, often meant to **surprise or shock the reader**. His attacks on government, Church, and high command – all held responsible for the suffering and death of so many men – were conveyed through a masterly use of **direct speech**.

Base Details T88

Siegfried Sassoon (1918)



Practise your listening with the karaoke



TRACK 046

In this short poem Sassoon denounces the gap between the soldiers who live and fight and die in the trenches and the high-ranking officers who stay in comfortable hotels far from the frontline. It is not just that the officers have plenty to eat and drink "in the best hotels", while the common soldiers are starving. The poets' anger is roused by the Majors' **insensitivity to the tragedy of war** and the patronising casual way in which they comment on the soldiers' deaths: "Poor young chap". And when the war is over they will safely go home – and die in their beds.

If I were fierce, and bald,¹ and short of breath
I'd live with scarlet² Majors at the Base,
And speed glum³ heroes up the line to death.
You'd see me with my puffy petulant face,
5 Guzzling⁴ and gulping⁵ in the best hotel,
Reading the Roll of Honour.⁶ "Poor young chap,"⁷
I'd say – "I used to know his father well;
Yes, we've lost heavily in this last scrap."⁸
And when the war is done and youth stone dead,
10 I'd toddle⁹ safely home and die – in bed.

- bald:** calvo.
- scarlet:** gli ufficiali sono rossi per diversi motivi: potrebbe essere un'allusione al loro viso rubizzo e in salute, perché non devono soffrire i patimenti della guerra, ma si potrebbe riferire anche al fatto che le uniformi dei più alti in comando spesso erano decorate da nastri rossi.
- glum:** tristi, tetri.
- Guzzling:** tracannando.
- gulping:** trangugiando.
- Roll of Honour:** lista dei soldati morti.
- chap:** ragazzo.
- scrap:** scaramuccia.
- toddle:** trotterellare.

FOCUS ON THE TEXT

Language

1 Find an example of alliteration in the text.

Structure and content

2 Answer the questions.

- What is the situation imagined by the speaker?
- Say whether this poem is satirical or not. Support your answer.
- What happens at the end of the poem?

BUILD UP YOUR COMPETENCES

Be an independent learner

3 **Speaking** Surf the net to find some information about Siegfried Sassoon and the other war poets. Choose one of the poets listed there and then tell your classmates some information about him and his works.