

# The letters in birdsong essay sample



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It is the natural assumption that fictional work is generally more powerful in presenting emotions and events than real work, as the writer of fiction is able to exercise an element of ‘poetic license’ to emphasise certain points. Imagination is far more flexible and easier to mould than reality, so it is therefore not unreasonable to assume that the fictional letters are more moving and powerful than the real ones. That said, it is also true that when reading about real events happening to real people, the impact on the reader is greater than a few exaggerated points.

The letters in *Birdsong* and those between Roland Brittain and Vera are all roughly centred around the same points; they are all just written differently. The majority of the letters in *Birdsong* and the letters from Roland to Vera all feature some information of the attack; however the way in which they’re presented couldn’t be more different. The letters in *Birdsong* describe their attack as “absolutely thumbs up”, “unlikely that [...] the enemy will survive (their) bombardment” and comparing it to “putting on a display like Firework Night”.

The comparison of their guns to fireworks and the whole event as “absolutely thumbs up” show the reader that their view of the war, and their attack, was definitely positive. The conviction presented in the men’s letters is what has the reader empathising with their family. The reader knows these men won’t survive and that most of what they’re saying is for their families’ benefit, this is what helps to make the letters more powerful. In comparison to *Birdsong*’s positive and less than descriptive presentation of their attack the night before the first day of the Somme, Roland’s letters to Vera couldn’t be any more different.

The matter-of-fact way in which Roland describes the attack is more powerful than the way Birdsong's letters simply paints the positive picture of their attack. He talks about "heavy artillery", the "scream of the shell passing overhead", "German snipers" and "fragments blown back from [...] bursting shells". These words help the readers picture exactly what Roland is having to endure and his simply stating the events casually moves the reader as they begin to understand that "falling brickwork" and the like are the norm for these soldiers.

The structure of the letters in birdsong seem to follow a similar pattern, in that all of them start, flesh out their letter and end it soon after. The fact that Roland had to stop and start his letter according to what was going on around him is acknowledged by the reader as the inevitable interruption of real life. The couple of hours between "lunch time" to "4p. m. " and then "after tea" plays a huge part in making the overall tone of the letters far more moving than the letters in Birdsong.

Having those few hours between each entry creates a certain amount of tension as the reader is now able to imagine just what is going on thanks to Roland's descriptive presentation of the conditions he's in. Readers expect a sense of chaos in war and Birdsong's letters don't seem to have that as much as Roland's as they start and end according to how the men wanted them to. The reader is able to understand that Roland wasn't able to control the situation he is in and this lack of control move the reader. He ends the first section of his letter with, "the firing has stopped now & it is lunch time".

The juxtaposition of war/firing guns and rest/lunch seems to have more of an effect on the reader than if it were to end with him saying it was lunch time. The casual tone he uses both devalues and emphasises what he's written as the readers understand that the conditions of war have now been so fully integrated into the soldiers' lives that it has become normal for them to casually mention fighting and daily routines in the same sentence. The reason the letters from *Birdsong* may seem to be more powerful and moving than Roland Brittain's letters are the fact that the readers know more about the soldiers in *Birdsong* than they do about Roland.

The fact that the letters in *Birdsong* are written after the reader has been able to identify and possibly empathise with the characters places a greater emphasis on what is about to happen. The readers know nothing about either Roland or Vera and that is why the letters hold a sense of anonymity in them. The characters Tipper, Weir, Firebrace, Byrne and Stephen have a background, a story in which the readers are familiar with and are therefore more likely to feel sympathetic towards. It is not unknown that being able to identify with someone makes whatever they're going through hold far more impact than if you were to know nothing about them.

This is why *Birdsong*'s letters could be said to be more powerful and moving than Roland Brittain's letters to Vera. In conclusion, although the natural assumption was that fictional work is more powerful and moving than real work, as shown above, both have their merits. With fiction, the writer is able to bend it to his will and emphasise certain things that will gain him more empathetic readers. He is also able to create a background for his characters

which allows the readers to identify with them. With real life, the reader is able to see just how chaotic and dangerous war is.

There is no place for smoke screening in real life as there is too much going on. With real letters, the reader can understand what the soldiers are going through and what it's like for them. Having war integrate itself into their daily routines is something most people can't begin to imagine and this is what makes the real letters powerful. Ultimately, real and fictional letters have the potential to be as powerful and moving as the each other, and this has been proven by the letters written in *Birdsong* and the letters from Roland Brittain to Vera, it all depends on how they are written.