

To what extent do the writers essay



**ASSIGN
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The extract from a 'Strange Meeting' clearly shows the very limited knowledge that the British public were exposed to about the true horrors of the First World War.

When compared to the letter Vera to Roland from 'Letters from a Lost Generation' her writing suggests that the British public were more aware of the reality of war, however there was still not a great understanding about what the soldiers were experiencing emotionally. 'Strange Meeting' is a modern novel written in past tense, which adds the value of hindsight to its content and can convey that looking back, the majority of the British public were in fact almost oblivious to what was happening to those fighting in the war. The letter, however, is from a woman, at home, writing to a soldier who is at war. It is therefore personal and a genuine example of the British public. The novel is also written in third person and the soldier's name is not mentioned, which sets a detached and distant tone, representative of the isolated feeling that dominates the extract.

This is strengthened by the abrupt sentence structure throughout it and the frequent use of commas. When it says, "But after that, he stayed silent."

The short and list-like structure and the image which is created by, "he could not join in, only sit there, staring at them" suggests little emotion and indicates that the man who has returned from war is an empty shell.

However, Vera's letter is extremely emotional using emotive language such as "heart-rendering". War is romanticised through her it, "one day I shall wake and find you again", it is almost poetic. Even though she knows of the "present dangers", which is repeated throughout her letter, the emotion takes

away from the reality and horror of war as she thinks about Roland “kissing” her photograph.

Not only is the letter emotional but it is quite philosophical as well, exploring the complex idea that she worries for Roland’s life so that he values it and does not “fling” it away. The feeling of isolation shows that the man who has returned to be “unhappy at home” is alone in his experience as the people that surround him, the British public have not been exposed to the true extent of war. Vera’s letter suggests that she has had an insight and was able to “realise war” through Roland’s letters but, even so, she still finds it hard to imagine as she says, “I feel that what I am reading is all a thrilling and terrible dream”. The man in ‘Strange Meeting’ finds himself in a position where “he can talk to no one, nobody knew”.

There is an obvious repetition of the word “knew” to emphasise that he “knew”, there were “no secrets” from him but everyone else was oblivious to the reality of war. Those who expressed their pompous “military opinions” did not understand the true horrors which “he” had seen. On hearing their views at a contrasting and ironic scene of “dinner parties”, his reaction is “disbelief”. He could not even begin to tell them the reality. A frustrated and negative atmosphere is created with the language used such as “bitterly”, “silent” and “hopelessly”. Insignificant details of everyday life remind only him of war and his own encounters such as the uniform the commissionaires wore triggering “a tightening in his head”.

The picturesque scenes of the man’s surroundings are described as “flower-sellers sitting around in Piccadilly, young women with parasols strolling in the

sunshine” contrasting with the lifeless mood of the section. The images show that nothing around him has changed since before the war because they do not know a reason for why it should change. In comparison with the letter, Vera knows that “ things will never be as they were”, which reveals that the British public were aware and affected by the war, they did worry for the soldiers and she considers Kingsley’s idea that ‘ Men must work & women must weep’ because it is so apt for war. She says that “ any number of weary apprehensive nights & days is not too high a price for the happenings that have led to my being able to feel the anxiety I do...

” Therefore, Vera knows that worrying is only a small effect of war and it is a better one to pay for the sake of the soldiers’ lives. The “... ” is also shows her pausing for thought of this complex idea and the idea of losing someone so close to her, again making emotion the essence of the letter.

Vera understands that “ thin grows the barrier between life and death in those trenches” whereas the first implication of the public even acknowledging the soldiers in the trenches is the “ ladies who came on Wednesdays to knit, grey and green socks and mittens and helmets, for the coming winter at the front”. It reveals that the British public considered trivial pastimes like knitting their contribution to the war when others were sacrificing their lives. The contrast between the unknowing British public and the man is suggested through the symbolism, “ shadows were long and black, against the brightness of the sun”. His memories which will stay with him in the background like a shadow contrast with the people at home who seem carefree because they are unaware of the true extent of war. The two texts do agree that the papers told very little of the true extent of war when

the letter says, “ nothing in the papers” and the extract says, “ in England you could not tell exactly what was happening, only the official reports came through to the newspapers, telling nothing”.

Therefore, it is likely to be true that newspapers were not blunt when reporting about the horror of war. Those who knew of the reality could use the newspapers to interpret what the real situation was using the Casualty Lists and reading “ between the lines” as the man in ‘ Strange Meeting’ did. It says that sometimes they “ hear things” but otherwise very little information is revealed about the war as if war is a subject not to be spoken. Even though Vera may have had a better understanding of the war from the letters that she received she still knew some details from other sources, she “ read about the ever-present dangers from snipers & bullets & German trenches 80 yards away”.

Strange Meeting’ even implies that the soldiers had little understanding about the true extent of war right up until after their training. Whilst he was being trained for war, he wrote to his mother telling her it was “ much pleasanter than I’d expected” and that he had the opportunity to ride a horse. Therefore, even the soldiers were not exposed to the horrors of war whilst being prepared for it. Since fighting and realising the extent of war, “ he” has been able to understand that Crawford was not a coward for staying in the military hospital.

He even questions whether he would have been able to cope with “ hearing the terrible noises”, “ night after night”. It shows that the man in the extract has gained an understanding only through experiencing war, and therefore

the British public would have been unable to fully understand any knowledge about the suffering revealed to them because they had not experienced it like the man. Soldiers changed as a result of fighting, “hardened”, and not being able to recognising who they had once been. The man no longer feels like he belongs at home because he has changed, “conditioned, now, to obeying”. His mother shows an ignorant view on war in her letter as she corrects her son saying he is “wrong about the riding” and telling him insignificant details rather than showing any thought to the seriousness of the situation he is in.

The public did not have to go through the ordeal that the man in the novel did and so no one else around him had changed, enforcing his feeling of isolation. Even though he does “hated” being at home, he did not want to be back at war either. He does not want to sleep because his memories haunt him, “he did not want to go to sleep”. In conclusion, ‘Strange Meeting’ conveys that the British public knew little of the true extent of war and that the soldiers who returned from it were permanently changed as a result of it.

They were not the same people, which made them feel strange to be home. They became bitter towards those surrounding them who were able to carry on as normal and did not address the subject of war because they knew nothing about it. The letter from Vera to Roland in ‘Letters from a Lost Generation’ conveys that the British public had more knowledge of the threat of war than the novel. Vera addresses the risks and dangers of war and goes into detail about the threats facing soldiers. The letter suggests that even when Vera was more aware of the true extent of war, it was still hard to imagine and that she was affected by it differently to soldiers.

To her, war evoked worry for the life of her loved one fighting but this is the limit of her understanding of the true nature of war.