

# Strange meeting analysis



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Adrian Barlow writes of Susan Hill's *Strange Meeting*: " At the time of its publication, to write a novel about intense relationships between men in the First World War was considered an ambitious risk for a woman writer. "

Compare and contrast the ways in which your three writers present relationships between men. 'One of the paradoxes of the War - one of the many - was that this most brutal of conflicts should set up a relationship between officers and men that was... domestic. Caring. As Layard would undoubtedly have said, maternal. -Pat Barker: *Birdsong* Susan Hill's *Strange Meeting*, published in 1971, Sebastian Faulks' *Birdsong*, published in 1993 and Siegfried Sassoon's poetry written during 'The Great War' are all set in World War One. A significant theme that all three texts have in common is the relationships between the soldiers and their development throughout the novel or poem. Strong relationships between men play a key part in any war literature and comradeship is an element of the First World War that is often dramatised or written about.

The government even used the idea of comradeship in their 'Pals Battalion' scheme, the plan being that men would fight harder if they fought with their friends. War fiction literature often focuses on the friendships between men at war, and the contrast of the relationships on the front line compared to those at home. The intensity of the relationships between the men is emphasised by the extraordinary circumstances they are placed in, which causes masses amounts of pressure.

Susan Hill's *Strange Meeting* deals with aspects of youth, experience, friendship and love. The representation of relationships between the men in the trenches is a key focus in this novel. Hill shows the positive impact of war

upon the men's relationships through the friendship of the two central characters, John Hilliard and David Barton, who would not normally be friends if not in combat situation. Throughout the novel the men form a powerful relationship which becomes absolutely crucial for survival.

In comparison *Birdsong*, by Sebastian Faulks, shows the different relationships Stephen Wraysford, the protagonist of the novel, has with Michael Weir the commander of the miners and Jack Firebrace a soldier in Stephen's rank who he becomes close to. The strong comradeship between Stephen Wraysford and Michael Weir in *Birdsong* allows both men to form a bond that would not have been of the same nature had the men not been in a combat situation. The war causes them to understand each other well.

An example of this is when Stephen reads Weir's rune cards, " Weir likes it. It makes him think that somebody cares about him". Stephen understands Weir's thoughts and feelings and fixes the cards to desirable predictions, and in doing so Weir feels comforted with the harsh unpredictable surroundings of war " I want you to do the runes. Tell my fortune". Stephen undergoes most of the combat as a nihilist, detached from any sense of reason, " I don't value my life enough. I have no sense of the scale of these sacrifices. I don't know what anything is worth".

Both officers and men consider him cold, isolated and a little odd however his relationship with Weir, similar to Hilliard and Barton, involves him on a personal level. The regular repetition of " talk to me", spoken by Weir, gives the images of one being in a desperate situation and consequently looking for someone, usually a friend, for support. This also sets up a dialogue

between both characters and the strength of their relationship is illustrated in a deep conversation about women, love and their sexual experiences.

The trust the two friends share is clear when Weir confesses he's never been with a woman, " I always wanted to but it was difficult", this leads to Stephen taking Weir to a prostitute as he believes this to be something Weir must experience. However this encounter goes badly, because both men have been psychologically affected by the horrors of war. This shows that the pressures of warfare are both damaging the men and bringing them closer together. PARA ON STRANGE MEETING In comparison to Stephen and Weir's relationship, in Stephen and Jack Firebrace's relationship we see a contrast.

Hierarchy is presented strongly between the two at first, and because of their different social and military status in the war they are treated differently. Stephen has power over Jack, this is shown when he finds Jack asleep in the tunnels and " boot cracked him" in a gesture which shows both his dominance and his ignorant behaviour. Faulks' describes Stephen's voice as " cold" which is a contrast to the warm behaviour and relationship he has with Weir. (P129). Although at first their relationship is shown with a vast contrast due to the power division, Stephen feels sympathy for Jack after he speaks to him and Weir about his son, further developing their relationship. (P134, P136). Sassoon's poem ' The General' comments on the soldiers view of the general and higher ranks to themselves in the war, " And we're cursing his staff for incompetent swine". As the general is a figurehead for the kind of planning that led to massive loss of life during warfare, the generals were often intensely disliked by the soldiers and they agreed their incompetent planning will lead to their deaths without his care, " now the

soldiers he smiled at are most of 'em dead". The General' is written with a distinctive upbeat rhythm that reflects the general's manner which ironically contrasts with the deaths that result from his incompetence, the rhythm is anapaestic. Although Sassoon shows the hatred most soldiers had for their leaders, in the case of Stephen and Jack this is contrasted. The most significant point of friendship and the break of social hierarchy are shown when Stephen allows Jack to call him by his first name while stuck in the tunnels " Shall I call you that? '... If you want" (P451), this allows both characters to be at the same level with one another and shows that social hierarchies do not apply as they are both fighting the same war. (P137) " But he did for them both by his plan of attack. ": the single, end-stopped line at the end of the poem is dramatic, and is the pointed lesson of this poem: that the General and his staff are responsible for the death of the men. Similarly in ' Strange Meeting' Hilliard has some authority over Barton, as being an experienced soldier he guides Barton through his journey to the war.

Barton is inexperienced and doesn't know the things he will see will haunt him for the rest of his life. Hilliard feels protective over Barton that it is his duty to look after him. The effects of the war changes the characters friendship as they go through stages of not talking as due to Barton's shock at war. The war definitely tests relationships but it also causes relationships to blossom. Throughout the second section of the novel both Jack and Stephen are intertwined. Each chapter starts with either Stephen or Jacks point of view.

Faulks uses this narrative technique to ensure readers develop this parallel time frame into a conjoining relationship and so to see how their lives are

inadvertently bound. Jack and Stephen tell each other things they haven't spoken before to anyone else, this breaks the formalities of war where everything is kept to yourself and highlights the desperation between the men to feel companionship. The friendships between men, even love between men, is sanctioned and encouraged during war.

In 'Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War', Joanna Bourke provides a wide-ranging debate on bonding between men during the war and also recognizes that masculinity, as performative gender identity, is multi-dimensional. The relationships between men are, as she argues, extraordinarily close, "almost consanguineous". In the male world of war, "men play all the required parts: parent, sibling, friend and lover." This is shown in *Birdsong* when Jack states his memory of his son was too vague to be able to draw his face, this is significant because "Jack had taken to drawing Stephen instead".

This shows admiration developing within their relationship. The fact that he has replaced his son's memory with Stephen shows Stephen's significant importance in his life, as his saviour and of course Stephen views Jack honourably as he had the compassion to save him from the mass grave and treat him as a human being, although being vulnerable at the time. (P372) Similarly in *Strange Meeting* Hilliard becomes involved in Barton's family, due to his own family's detachment. This shows that Hilliard and Barton are more than friends, Hilliard feels that it is his duty to keep him safe similar to that an older brother would feel.

The affection Hilliard receives from Barton's family overwhelms him, as he never received this from his own family. Linking back to Joanna Bourke's

argument, they have their disagreements but deep down they care for each other and would also die for one another. QUOTATIONS NEEDED Stephen and Weir are unable to have a normal relationship whilst in the trenches, as war provides the possibility that either man could die at any point. This is demonstrated in Jack Firebrace's thoughts, “ The men he was frightened to befriend in case their bodies came apart the next day in front of his eyes”.

Although the serious tones of war and death are present, Faulks brings in laughter to the novel to diffuse potentially life threatening events and also demonstrates the characteristics of a good relationship “ Weir began to laugh” “ Well done. ” “ What do you mean, ‘ well done’? ” “ You're laughing. ” “ I'm drunk. ”. Faulks has used Jack's thoughts as a representative of all soldiers. The pressures cause tension, with the eventual result of Stephen shouting at Weir “ Fuck off weir, fuck off and leave me alone” (P374).

This is the climax of an argument between the two men, in which Stephen vents his frustration at Weir and tries to stop him talking about the war and death. Weir tells Stephen “ you've been a marvellous friend to me” but Stephen wants to be distracted from the war and lashes out. This is the men's last exchange before Weir's death, which Stephen later regrets. This shows that Stephen cared greatly for Weir, and it was the increasing pressure of warfare described throughout the novel that led to his outburst. The opinion that war makes relationships is demonstrated here.

As Weir and Stephen's relationship breaks down, we start to see a slow progression of closeness between Jack and Stephen which is developed, especially after Weir dies and Stephen has no-one left. The breakdown of one relationship became the embodiment of another, when Stephen is

trapped in the tunnel he feels he has nothing to live for since Weir died and finding a way out for Jacks survival is his only encouragement. The affirmation of male homosocial relationships is an important aspect of masculinity in these texts. Through the relationship of Stephen and Michael, Faulks elevates this to a very high point.

He also acknowledges that some men enjoy the experience of war and some actually flourish. Michael Weir joins the army to escape the narrow confines of his life in middle-class England, and in many ways it is shown to be the making of him as a man. He responds very well to those aspects of male bonding within homosocial relationships and says “ I liked the comradeship. It was as simple as that. I had no friends before, and suddenly I found that I had, if not the friendship then at least the company of hundreds of men of my age” (p125).