World War One: Contextual quotes

Read through the following quotes from novels or plays written about WW1, and choose five which you feel most represent the experience of war. Make notes to explain your response:

**Prose**

*Birdsong* by Sebastian Faulks (Vintage, 1994)
- ‘some crime against nature is about to be committed’ (nature conveys futility/horror of war)
- ‘No-one in England can know what this is like.’
- ‘an exploration of already immune to death’ (p.125)
- ‘how far men can be degraded’
- ‘... he stood for a better position on the body of the man he had killed’
  Horrock pulled the silver cross from his chest and hurled it from him.’ (p.230)
- ‘Nothing was divine anymore everything was profane’ (p.230)
- ‘We can’t wait to let Fritz have it!’ (p.221 Tipper’s letter)
- ‘But you’re not alone. I’m here. I’m someone.’ (p.451 in tunnel)
- ‘He would die alone and unmourned.’ (p.177)

*Strange Meeting* by Susan Hill (Penguin, 1989)
- ‘we are drones, not fighting men’ (written by Barton in his letters home to convey reality of war)
- ‘He had lost some gaiety and also some edge of understanding.’ (about Barton)
- ‘Every couple of feet he came up against a body or a pile of bodies.’ (p.168)
- ‘They garble everything, it’s all lies.’ (p.37)
- ‘Two days of absolute bloody chaos. Bloody pointless mess.’ (p.45)
- ‘So many pointless, messy, inglorious deaths, “Just like that”.’ (p.59)
- ‘Men are “dying for the cause” ’ (letter from Barton to his family) (p.132)
- ‘Blood had splattered up and over the parapet’ (p.112)
- ‘They had amputated his left leg though he still did not believe it’ (p.171)

*Testament of Youth* by Vera Brittain (Penguin, 1994)
- ‘if a man cannot be useful to his country, he is better dead’ (conveys patriotism at beginning of war)

**Drama**

*Journey’s End* by R C Sherriff (Heinemann, 1993)
- ‘There’s something rather romantic about it all’ (Osborne conveys patriotism of war)

*Accrington Pals* by Peter Whelan (Samuel French, 1982)
- ‘ARTHUR: Oh God. Do you smile to see your handiwork?’ (Arthur questions his faith in religion due to horrors witnessed in war)
- ‘BERTHA: I couldn’t love a man who stayed at home ...’
  Off comes the lid of the coffin and there’s two great Germans with a machine gun.’ (p.89)
- ‘Oh God … Do you smile still?’ (p.67)
- ‘They’ve taken the best men’ (p.10)
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**Oh! What a Lovely War** by Joan Littlewood (Methuen, 2006)

- ‘MRS PANKHURST: The politicians chatter like imbeciles while civilisation bleeds to death’ (Mrs Pankhurst conveys incompetence of politicians during war and her anger at the situation)
- ‘we think you ought to go’
- ‘We'll never tell them, oh we'll never tell them’
- ‘SERGEANT: Heads, trunks, blood everywhere and all he’s worried about is a damned leg.’ (Act 2 p.51)
- ‘MRS PANKHURST: Slowly but surely, we are killing off the finest and best of the male population’ (Act 2 p.66)
- ‘HAIG: I feel that every step I take is guided by the divine will’ (p.59)
- ‘FEMALE SINGER: Be a man; enlist today’ (p.20)
- ‘Oh, oh, oh, it’s a lovely war ... Don’t we pity the poor civilian ...’ (p.39)
- ‘This is not war, sir, it is slaughter.’ (p.59)
- *Keep the home fires burning* (p.81)
  ‘Let no tears add to their hardship ... / Although your heart is breaking / Make it sing this cheery song’
- *Your king and country* (p.13)
  ‘Now your country calls you / And no matter what befalls, / We shall love you all the more.’

Now in pairs, read through the quotes selected from WW1 poems, and identify any themes and issues which are suggested by the quotes. For example, a key theme suggested by the first two quotes is that of **wasted lives/a lost generation.** Be prepared to discuss your ideas in class.

**Poetry**

‘slain by no wind of age’

**The Falling Leaves** by Margaret Cole (metaphor conveys idea the men died prematurely in war)

‘You threw four years into the melting pot’

**The Lament of the Demobilised** by Vera Brittain

‘no longer caged and penned up’

**War Girls** by Jessie Pope (war opened up new opportunities for women)

‘You must remember him.’

**To Tony (Aged 3)** by Marjorie Wilson

‘What God abandoned, these defended’

**Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries** by A. E. Houseman

‘To the end, to the end, they remain’

**For The Fallen** by Laurence Binyon
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‘You who sat safe at home,
And let us die,
You who said all was well
and knew the lie.’

‘Transport of wounded in Mesopotamia’ by Margery Lawrence (Scars Upon My Heart, p.87)

‘Smooth cheeked and golden, food for shells and guns’

‘Joining the colours’ by Katharine Tynan (Scars Upon My Heart, p.119)

‘To man the gap and keep the wall.’

‘A Recruit From The Slums’ by Emily Orr (Scars Upon My Heart, p. 87)

‘Honour has come back, as a king, to earth’

‘The Dead’ by Rupert Brooke

‘We’re none of us the same!’

‘They’ by Siegfried Sassoon

‘How light must be your freed heart now’

‘Subalterns’ by Elizabeth Daryush

‘We who have turned the Devil’s Grindstone, Borne with the hell called War’

‘He Went For A Soldier’ by Ruth Comfort Mitchell

‘We well see what we are doing,
Tough some may not see
[…England’s need are we’

‘Men who march away’ by Thomas Hardy

‘Are icy memories
That must forever freeze
The sunny hours they bought’

‘Subalterns’ by Elizabeth Daryush

‘Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour’

‘Now, God Be Thanked Who Has Matched Us With His Hour’ by Rupert Brooke

‘How glows
My heart at the hot thought
Of battle’s glorious throes!’

‘Subalterns’ by Elizabeth Daryush – shows naivety of those at home

‘I am the enemy you killed, my friend.’

‘Strange Meeting’ by Wilfred Owen