



A Soldier's Declaration

Siegfried Sassoon
(1917)

Siegfried Sassoon had been back on leave in England for almost three months, recovering from a severe bullet wound, when he wrote this amazing letter and sent it to his commanding officer on 6 July 1917. The War Office had never had to deal with a conscientious objector like Sassoon. He was renowned as one of the country's finest young poets and was also a war hero. Sassoon wrote these lines to refuse to return to the trenches. Indeed, he only escaped a court-martial as a result of his being declared unfit for service and treated for shell-shock. Copies of the controversial letter reached local newspapers, the House of Commons (where it was read out by the anti-war Liberal MP, Hastings Lees-Smith) and eventually the London Times.

I am making this statement as an act of wilful¹ defiance of military authority, because I believe the war is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it.

I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers. I believe that this war, upon which I entered as a war of defence and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and conquest. I believe that the purposes for which I and my fellow soldiers entered upon this war should have been so clearly stated² as to have made it impossible to change them, and that, had this been done, the objects which actuated us would now be attainable by negotiation.

I have seen and endured the suffering of the troops, and I can no longer be a party³ to prolong these sufferings for ends⁴ which I believe to be evil and unjust.

I am not protesting against the conduct of the war, but against the political errors and insincerities for which the fighting men are being sacrificed.

On behalf of those who are suffering now I make this protest against the deception which is being practised on them; also I believe that I may help to destroy the callous complacency with which the majority of those at home regard the continuance of agonies which they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realise.

July, 1917

S. Sassoon

- 1 wilful. Volontaria.
2 stated. Dichiarati.
3 be a party. Partecipare.
4 ends. Fini.

READING COMPETENCE

1 READ the text and match the highlighted words with their meaning.

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1 tolerated, bore with patience | 5 self-satisfaction |
| 2 moved to action | 6 achievable |
| 3 uncaring | 7 fraud |
| 4 as a representative | 8 contempt, disregard |

2 READ the text again and do the following activities.

1 Answer the following questions.

- Who is giving this declaration?
- What was the war according to him when he joined the army?
- What has it now become?
- What has he seen and endured?
- How does he consider the ends of this War?
- What is he protesting against?

2 Focus on Sassoon's repetition of the personal pronoun 'I'. Its function is to

- make clear it is a report by an emotionally devoid authority.
- reinforce that these are the arguments of an impassioned individual.
- convey a constrained, detached collective view.

**3** Complete the paragraph with the words from the box.proclamations
understoodimperative
powerfullytarget
verb

repetition

The **(1)** of the phrase 'I believe' **(2)** emphasises Sassoon's points, increasing the clarity of the document and the rapidity in which these concepts can be **(3)** The use of the **(4)** 'believe' is also **(5)** , as it underlines a determination to direct each of the **(6)** following the phrase to the **(7)** of the letter, that is, the Cabinet.

4 Sassoon blames for the protraction of the conflict.

- A the inefficiency of the troops
- B the political administration
- C the single soldiers that are not performing their duty

5 The word 'insincerities' implies that the government

- A has deceived the population.
- B cares for the population.
- C praises honour in the population.

6 What feeling does Sassoon's straightforward language convey? Tick as appropriate.

- ☐ Resignation.
- ☐ Outrage.
- ☐ Patience.
- ☐ Irritation.
- ☐ Peacefulness.
- ☐ Tolerance.

7 What does the statement 'I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers' tell the reader of the relationship between the combatants and the authorities?**8** Identify the lines where Sassoon's denouncement acquires a degree of moral action.**> COMPETENCE: PRODUCING A WRITTEN TEXT ON A GIVEN SUBJECT**

- 3** **WRITE** a 10/12-line paragraph about World War I. What kind of conflict was it? What was the impact of war on young people? Which of the texts you have studied dealt with the crude reality of war?