

# “Goodbye to All That” by Robert Graves

## Discussion Questions

November 19, 2016

1. What is the meaning of the title?
2. Graves states that he feels ostracized while at school at Charterhouse: “A potato out of a different bag from the rest.” (p. 57) Do you think this feeling is something that Graves experiences his entire life (at least, what he presents to the reader in his autobiography)?
3. When describing the reasoning behind enlisting, Graves makes the following statement:

It never occurred to me that newspapers and statesmen could lie. I forgot my pacifism – I was ready to believe the worst of the Germans.” (p. 94)

Do we really understand why Graves suddenly change his mind?

4. Graves’ mother was German; the family had been to Germany many times to visit immediate relatives up to just before World War I commenced. What do you think of Graves’ family’s reaction to enlistment:

I immediately became a hero to my family. My mother, who said to me: "My race has gone mad," regarded my going as a religious act; my father was proud that I had "done the right thing." (p. 97)

5. Reacting to life and death in the trenches, Graves says that "Pessimism made everyone superstitious." (p. 156) Do you think this is a natural reaction to being a soldier limited to the view from the trenches?
6. Paul Fussell, an American Historian known for his book "The Great War & Modern Memory" asserts that Graves's book was satire. Yet, much of Graves' depiction of life in and out of the trenches is relatively objective, with an almost journalistic tone. What do you think? How reliable is Graves’ autobiography?

- a. One can joke with a badly-wounded man and congratulate him on being out of it. One can disregard a dead man. But even a miner can't make a joke that sounds like a joke over a man who takes three hours to die after the top part of his head has been taken off by a billet fired at twenty yards range. (p. 150)

7. After the 1916 Battle of the Somme (more than 1 million were wounded or killed) and subsequent recovery period in England, Graves considers pacifism, but returns to the front because "Every one was mad." "Our function there was not to kill Germans, though that might happen, but to make things easier for the men under our command." (p. 290) What do you think of Graves’ conclusion to return to the front?
8. Do you find Graves' transition to socialism after the War surprising given his upbringing and class?
9. What do you make of Graves’ opinion of his Egyptian students?
10. Graves’ depiction of his wife, Nancy, mother of his four children, is also relatively detached. We learn at the end of the book that they had parted ways quite suddenly in 1929. What is not described in the body of the 1929 or 1957 is Graves’ relationship with Laura Riding, who accompanied the Graves family to Egypt and subsequently became part of a “three-life.” How does the omission of Laura Riding affect the accuracy of this autobiography?

Bonus: For those who have read or seen Graves’ “I, Claudius” series, do you see any influence of the author’s WWI experience in the characters and events?

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**Dulce et Decorum Est**

By [Wilfred Owen](#)

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,  
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,  
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,  
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.  
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,  
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;  
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots  
Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling  
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,  
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling  
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime.—  
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,  
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight,  
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace  
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,  
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;  
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,  
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud  
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—  
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest  
To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*  
*Pro patria mori.*