

# **Birdsong** **By Sebastian Faulks**

## **Introduction to the Course | Summer Reading**

This booklet contains the work that **MUST** be completed during the Summer before the course starts in September. The coursework unit is designed to be an independent study unit. We will all study *Birdsong*, by Sebastian Faulks and you must then decide what second book you will use for comparison.



Name:

Task	Summary	Reading	Done	
<b>Part One   France 1910</b>				
Activity 1: Sense of Place	We are introduced to Stephen Wraysford, a young Englishman staying with the Azaire family in Amiens, France. He falls passionately in love with Isabelle Azaire, a married woman. This affair profoundly affects both their lives – a moment of happiness and tragedy.	Pgs 3 -33		
Activity 2: Characterisation		Pgs 34-47		
Activity 3: Themes				
Activity 4: Social Context				
Activity 5: Symbolism				
Activity 6: Passion and Self Control			Pgs 48-62	
Activity 7: Narrative Viewpoint			Pgs 63-78	
Activity 8: Characterisation			Pgs 89-108	
Activity 9: Themes			Pgs 109-117	
Activity 10: Themes				
Activity 11: Essay Question				
<b>Part Two   France 1916</b>				
Activity 1: Sense of Place and Narrative Technique	Stephen finds himself a soldier battling amid the chaos of the Battle of the Somme. This section focuses on the immense physical and psychological trauma of trench warfare, loyalty, friendship, and the growing disconnection from ordinary civilian life.	Pgs 121-138		
Activity 2: Boundaries of Human Behaviour		Pgs 139 -156		
Activity 3: Characterisation and Instinct vs Self Control		Pgs 157 - 178		
Activity 4: Characterisation		Pgs 179 - 184		
Activity 5: Human Pity		Pgs 185- 193		
Activity 6: Love		Pgs 194 - 207		
Activity 7: Narrative Technique		Pgs 213 - 37		
Activity 8: Narrative Shape		Pgs 238 -240		
Activity 9: Essay				
<b>Part 3   England 1978</b>				
Activity 1: Characterisation	As the war drags on, we follow Stephen and his soldiers through the ongoing struggles – raids, tunnel operations, growing disillusionment, and a deepening understanding of death. We see relationships forged under pressure and the human cost of conflict.	Pgs 243 - 250		
Activity 2: Social Mores		Pgs 251 - 257		
Activity 3: Memorials		Pgs 263 - 264		
Activity 4: War as Sacrifice		Pgs 265 - 278		
Activity 5: Essay				
<b>Part 4   France 1917</b>				
Activity 1: Home	This introduces Elizabeth Benson, Stephen's granddaughter, who is trying to piece together his story. Her quest reflects a growing understanding of the past's impact on the present – how trauma resonates through generations.	Pgs 281 - 289		
Activity 2: Symbols		Pgs 299 -307		
Activity 3: Fear		Pgs 308 - 323		
Activity 4: Loss		Pgs 342 - 347		
Activity 5: Men as Flesh		Pgs 348 - 352		
Activity 6: Home		Pgs 353 - 364		

Part Five   England 1978 -79			
Activity 1: Past and the Present	The soldiers' eventual move toward peace. We see the survivors emerge from the chaos – injured, traumatized, but alive – while honouring their fallen comrades.	Pgs 393 - 398	
Activity 2: Human Pity		Pgs 399 -405	
Activity 3: Relationships		Pgs 406 - 409	
Activity 4: Past and Present		Pgs 410 - 416	
Activity 5: Telling		Pgs 417 - 422	
Activity 6: Essay			
Part 6   France 1918			
Activity 1: Jeanne	Elizabeth deepens her understanding by accessing historical documents, meeting people connected to her grandfather, and wrestling with the moral implications of the war. Her search helps illuminate the human stories hidden within history's grand narrative.	Pgs 428 - 434	
Activity 2 :Sense of Place		Pgs 435 - 443	
Activity 3: Stephen		Pgs 443 - 450	
Activity 4: Enforced Intimacy		Pgs 450 - 456	
Activity 5: Patriotism		Pgs 473 - 476	
Activity 6: Jack Firebrace		Pgs 476 - 478	
Activity 7: Essay			
Part 7   England 1979			
Activity 46: Eating, Drinking, Smoking	The novel draws together the threads of past and present, emphasizing reconciliation, renewal, and the affirmation of life after catastrophic conflict. The closing resonates with the persistence of memory and the necessity of understanding our ancestors' struggles.	Pgs 489 - 495	
Activity 47: Themes		Pgs 495 - 503	

### **Activity 1: Sense of Place**



1. Consider the impression created of Amiens in 1910 in these opening sections. What atmosphere is suggested? Analyse which details create this atmosphere.

### **Activity 2: Characterisation**

2. Think about Isabelle Azaire as portrayed in these first four sections. In what ways does she seem out of place in that house and that social setting?

### **Activity 3: Themes**

3. Several themes are introduced in these opening sections, which will become centrally important later in the novel. Consider these themes:
- the theme of private conscience and public role. In what ways do these opening sections contrast characters' private consciences with their public roles?
  - The theme of trust and betrayal. Isabelle claims to be 'loyal' to Azaire; does her behaviour support this? How do you react to the fact that Azaire's trust is being betrayed by his wife and his guest?
  - The theme of religious faith. Compare Isabelle's 'act of Christian charity' (pg 32) with Aunt Elise's 'religious sensitivity' (pg 26) Which is more sincere?

### **Activity 4: Social Context**

1. What impressions have you formed of the role of women in France 1910 in the novel? Why does Isabelle not simply refuse to comply with others' expectations, and which social expectations seem to limit her power of independence?

### **Activity 5: Symbolism**

1. Examine the language used to describe the ambience of the family picnic on pg 40 - 47. In what ways do the images symbolise aspects of the characters' lives and the mood of their social group?

### **Activity 6: Passion and Self Control**

1. Examine how the theme of passion and self control is developed in this section, on both private and public levels. Analyse the language used in the account of Stephen and Isabelle's love making. What associations are suggested linguistically between their passion, and images of violence, death and oblivion?

### **Activity 7: Narrative Viewpoint**

1. When Stephen and Isabelle move to the red room to make love, the narrative shifts from his viewpoint to hers. What is the effect of this shift in perspective?

### **Activity 8: Characterisation**

1. Compare and contrast the ways in which Isabelle and Stephen react to 'what had occurred between them' (pg 67)

### **Activity 9: Themes**

1. The theme of the effects of time: read the paragraph on page 101 beginning 'she dreamed of pale faces...'. Now turn back to page 72 and read the two paragraphs from 'so many dead...' to '...the weight of time..'. What point is being made about the 'repeated loop of time'?

### **Activity 10: Themes**

1. The theme of religious faith: compare Isabelle's visit to a church on pg 113-114 with Stephen's visit to a cathedral on page 71- 72. Consider the ways in which the narrative styles reflect their contrasting ways of thinking. Are there any similarities between their reflections on human attempts to find 'meaning' in life?

### **Activity 11: Essay Questions: Pick and plan for one essay question.**

1. Consider the ways victory and defeat are explored on a personal level in Part One.
2. Writer's have often depicted the period before the start of the first world war nostalgically, as a serene and golden time. But Faulks combines nostalgia with a less serene picture. In what ways has he highlighted tensions within French society of the period?
3. What kinds of significance does the motif of birdsong take on in Part One?
4. How does Faulks employ a sense of place in Part One?
5. Consider the presentation of passion in Part One



Activity 1: Sense of Place and Narrative Technique

1. Still in France, but two years into the war, the characters seem to inhabit another world from that of Part One. Pick out ten details from the above pages that convey the world Jack Firebrace now inhabits his role in it and his reactions to the events of this section. How are details of his life back in England used to create contrasts with his experiences of war?

2. Margaret's letter to Jack is the fourth letter in the novel so far. The first three were Stephen's unsent letter to his employer (pp. 52-3), Marguerite's letter to Isabelle (p.106) and Isabelle's letter to Jeanne (pp.114-15). One might include as a fifth letter that Isabelle did not write to Stephen after leaving him. Pick any of these letters and consider what it says and what it does not say. In what ways is communication by letter different from communication by speech? What things are easier to say by letter than in speech, and what things are harder? - Margaret writes to Jack Firebrace about their son, John. Isabelle does not write to Stephen about their daughter. What is the effect of this contrast?

Activity 2: Boundaries of Human Behaviour

1. Read the paragraph beginning 'All right. I'll tell you something' on p.150, in which Stephen says men will always 'do more' no matter how degrading. Now read Henry V's speech beginning 'Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more' in Act III, scene I of Shakespeare's Henry V. Contrast Stephen's and Henry's images of war and its significance.

2. Stephen is six years older than he was in Part One, and so far in Part Two we have only seen him from other people's points of view. From p.145 onwards the narrative reverts to his point of view and we see how he thinks. In what ways has his character developed since Part One, and in what ways is it similar?

3. 'They were men who could each have a history but, in the shadow of what awaited them, were interchangeable' (p.144). Explore how these sections of the novel have emphasised the dehumanising effect of the men's military roles.

Activity 3: Character and Instinct vs Self Control

1. In these sections we see some of the complexity lying behind Stephen's 'coldness'. What do we learn? What new light does this throw on his actions up to this point in the novel?

Activity 4: Characterisation

1. Stephen believes that the men do not respect him and that he has never been loved. Assess whether he is right. Consider in particular Firebrace's

and Weir's attitudes towards Stephen in these two sections.

#### Activity 5: Human Pity

1. 'Compassion has more value than passion'. Discuss, with reference to Stephen's experiences in Parts One and Two of *Birdsong*.

#### Activity 6: Love

1. Why does Stephen react as he does to the younger prostitute? Do you consider any of Stephen's actions in this passage to be 'beyond the boundaries of human behaviour' (cf. p141)?

#### Activity 7: Narrative technique

1. In what ways does the narrative create a sense of foreboding in this section? How does Faulks play on the irony that the reader probably knows that the Allies suffered devastating losses in the Somme offensive?

#### Activity 8: Narrative Shape

1. What does this brief section add to the novel?
2. Stephen tells Weir to 'Hold on'. To what?



#### Activity 9: Essay Question

1. Does Part Two of *Birdsong* suggest that war has a moral code of its own?
2. Stephen is referred to as 'cold' several times at the start of Part Two, but then these references stop. Discuss the ways in which his experiences of war have changed Stephen by the end of the second part.
3. Consider the contribution to Part Two made by two or more of the following characters: Shaw, Gray, Byrne, Weir.
4. Compare the ways in which the theme of boundaries is developed in Parts One and Two of *Birdsong*.
5. Discuss the theme of nature's indifference in Part Two.
6. 'Hardly any one soldier in a hundred was inspired by religious feeling of even the crudest kind' (Graves). Discuss Faulks' presentation of faith in the second part of *Birdsong*.

7. 'War drives home the truth that, whatever else human beings are, whatever their hopes and feelings, their personalities and memories, in the end they are little more than flesh and blood.' Discuss Faulks' presentation of war in the light of this comment.
8. Compare the presentation in Parts One and Two.
9. Contrast the ways in which the theme of private conscience and public role is developed in Parts One and Two of *Birdsong*.
10. Compare Faulks' fictional presentation of the soldiers' experience of trench warfare with that in another genre or medium, such as the displays at London's Imperial War Museum, a television documentary, a film narrative. Is Faulks' account true to life? What elements has he altered or omitted?

### Birdsong | Part Three | England 1978 | Activities 1-5

#### Activity 1: Characterisation

1. This section introduces the character of Elizabeth Benson. What do we learn about her - her life, her personality, her values- and how is this information conveyed?

#### Activity 2: Social Mores

1. Examine the circumstances of Elizabeth's life compared with those of Isabelle in Part One. Can you find any similarities in disposition, taste or outlook? Which contrasts in the circumstances of their lives are due to the different social expectations of women that existed in Amiens in 1910 and in London in 1978?

#### Activity 3: Memorials

1. Re-read the description of the memorial to the 'lost' that Elizabeth discovers, and analyse the developing stages of her reaction to it.
2. What connotations does the word 'lost' have? Consider what is 'lost' by characters in Part One and Two of *Birdsong*. In which ways are characters themselves lost? In some senses the society they lost their lives for is not the society in which we now live. What has been lost, and what has been gained, in return for their sacrifice?

#### Activity 4: War as Sacrifice

1. ...'it was difficult to see her own life as the pinnacle of previous generations' sacrifices' (p.271). what does 'sacrifice' mean? Is it accurate to apply this word to the deaths of soldiers in the First World War, or is such usage a euphemism for 'waste'?

2. It is confirmed in this section that Stephen is Elizabeth's grandfather. What suggestions are there that Elizabeth is also related to Isabelle? Consider her temperament as well as circumstantial hints. These unconfirmed suggestions intimate that perhaps Elizabeth owes her life to Stephen and Isabelle's affair. What new perspectives would this put on the events of Part One?

#### Activity 5: Essay Question

1. How does Part Three play on the irony that the reader knows more about Stephen's life than his granddaughter does, and can see connections that she is unaware of?
2. Compare and contrast Elizabeth's character with Isabelle's.
3. Compare and contrast the role of women in contemporary London with their role in Amiens at the start of the century, as both are depicted in *Birdsong*.
4. 'The differences in the love affairs between Stephen and Isabelle in 1910 and between Elizabeth and Robert in 1978 foreground the contrasting mores of these two periods.' Discuss.
5. Find patterned images in Part Three of *Birdsong* that suggest connections between the past and the present.
6. Discuss the significance of remembering in Part Three of *Birdsong*.
7. The final lines of Shakespeare's *King Lear* are 'we that are young/Shall never see so much, nor live so long'. Consider the claim that in Part Three of *Birdsong* Faulks presents the younger generation as ignorant and unwise compared to their grandparents generation.



#### Birdsong | Part Four | France 1917 | Activities 1- 6

##### Activity 1: Home

1. Weir told Stephen on page 153 that he joined the army to get away from home. After two years at war he needed to feel 'at home', 'restored to his own sense of self' on home leave, but the experience disappoints: he no longer belongs. Analyse the miscommunication between Weir and his parents.

##### Activity 2 : Symbols

2. Given the brutality of their war experiences, account for the fact that neither man can kill the canary. What does the bird symbolise to Stephen?

### Activity 3: Fear



3. When talking with Ellis, Stephen distinguishes between the fear of physical danger and Weir's fear that the war has 'no purpose'. Define as accurately as you can the differences between these two fears.

### Activity 4: Loss

By relating this section to the whole, discuss how the novel conveys the brutalising effects of too much loss.

4. Look up the lyrics to popular songs of the First World War, such as 'Pack Up Your Troubles' and 'It's a long way to Tipperary' and 'If you were the only girl in the world'. What attitudes to war and to home to these songs convey?
5. "Pack Up Your Troubles" and all that stuff?" said Irene (pg 256). 'Terrible business, wasn't it?' Compare this facile comment with the account of Jack Firebrace smothering his unbearable grief at losing Shaw by singing. What does this juxtaposition imply about a contemporary understanding of the First World War?

### Activity 5: Men as Flesh

6. The description of the men retrieving bodies that are rotting, with images of human beings reduced to rat meat, is shocking. (You might compare this description with some of Siegfried Sassoon's more explicit poems, like 'Counter Attack'.) How do you react to such visually explicit images. Are they obscene, or are they justified by their artistic purpose in the narrative?

### Activity 6: Home

7. This is the first time we have seen Stephen in England and it is clear that he does not feel 'at home' there. Does the attitude of the civilians surprise you? Can you account for it?

Birdsong | Part 5 | England 1978 -79 | **Activities 1 - 6**

### Activity 1: Past and the Present

1. Stuart phones for a 'chat'. The word 'chat' originally meant a louse, and 'chatting' was the ritual of delousing verminous shirts using thumbnails and candle flames; eventually it came to mean the conversation that accompanied this ritual. Jack Firebrace recalls 'chatting' for Shaw on pp 345-6. If Faulks is inviting through this echo a comparison of the heartfelt love of Firebrace for Shaw with the half hearted flirtation between Stuart

and Elizabeth, what is the point of the comparison?

### **Activity 2: Human Pity**

2. Look back to p 352, the last time that Brennan figured in the novel. Compare the two portrayals of him. How does this section emphasise the 'pity of the past'?

### **Activity 3: Relationships**

3. Assess the attitudes of Robert and Elizabeth towards their relationship. Then compare these with Stephen and Isabelle's attitude towards their affair in Parts One and Four. Look in particular at their different attitudes towards 'difficult decisions' (e.g. pp334 and 409). To what extent are the contrasts down to the different social mores of their time?

### **Activity 4: Past and Present**

4. Compare and contrast Stuart with Stephen

### **Activity 5: Telling**

5. Examine Elizabeth's reaction to her pregnancy on p 419. Compare it with Isabelle's reaction on p 109. Pick the words that carry the greatest significance and discuss what they reveal.

6. Consider the language used by Stephen in his diary (once decoded). In what ways could it be called anti-rhetorical?

### **Activity 6: Essay Question**

1. Why is Elizabeth so intent on establishing a 'vital connection' with the past?
2. Like Part 3, Part Five implies contrasts between Stephen's world and the modern world. What are the effects of these contrasts?
3. Discuss Faulks' presentation of relationships in Part Five.
4. Discuss the theme of communication in Part 5.
5. What does Part Five add to the theme of love in the novel?

Birdsong | Part Six | France 1918 | [Activities 1 -7](#)

### **Activity 1: Jeanne**

1. We are given a more direct account of Jeanne's thoughts in this section than at any other point earlier in the novel. What is her attitude to Stephen

here? What human attitudes does she stand for? Using this section as a starting point, examine Jeanne's role in the novel.

### **Activity 2: Sense of Place**

2. The setting shifts from the hell of trench warfare to a different kind of hell underground. Analyse the ways in which Faulks uses physical and symbolic details in these pages to conjure a sense of place in the tunnels.

### **Activity 3 Stephen**

3. Stephen first met Jack Firebrace when the latter was up on a charge of falling asleep on sentry duty. Compare Stephen's reactions to Firebrace on that occasion (pp133-7) with his reactions to him in this section. Stephen believes that he no longer feels compassion. Does he act compassionately now?

### **Activity 4: Enforced Intimacy**

4. Jack Firebrace thinks of the 'lost illusions of his life...the things on which he had based his faith had proved unstable'. (p.454). Using Firebrace as a starting point, explore the theme of loss in the novel.

### **Activity 5: Patriotism**

5. Levi's reaction to losing his brother is to claim, 'I love the Fatherland...A death in my family...binds me more than ever to it' (p475). That he is Jewish gives this comment an ironic significance. Earlier, to motivate himself to keep going, Stephen says to Firebrace, 'I want to tell you about the Germans and how much I hate them. I'm going to tell you why you have to live' (p471). Explore the topic 'Patriotism preserves the lie that the enemy are different'.

### **Activity 6: Jack Firebrace**

6. Examine the low key way in which Firebrace's death is described (p 477) and the description of Weir's death (p 385). What effects are created by the bare style that Faulks uses at these crucial moments?

### **Activity 7: Essay Question**

1. Discuss the contribution made by Jack Firebrace to *Birdsong*.
2. Consider the effects created by the characterisation of Levi in part six.



Activity 1: Eating, Drinking, Smoking

1. The scene in the French restaurant to which Elizabeth and her mother go continues an emphasis on food, wine and cigarettes that has run throughout the novel. The effect here is largely to contrast with the ways in which food, drink and cigarettes were handled during the scenes set in the first world war. Choose an earlier scene (p. 44, 149, 313-15 or 389) and compare it with this presentation of how characters eat, drink and smoke.

Activity 2: Themes

2. Re-read pp 110-115 and compare them with pp 496-8. What do these passages contribute to the novel's themes of trust, betrayal, isolation and belonging?
3. Discuss the ways in which part seven gives the sense of a completed circle.