

Journey's End

by R.C. Sherriff · Language: EN

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Overview

R.C. Sherriff's *Journey's End* is a powerful anti-war play set in the British trenches of World War I, specifically in a dugout near the front lines. The story unfolds over four days in March 1918, just before the German spring offensive. The play focuses on Captain Stanhope, a young and highly respected company commander who has been at the front for three years and copes with the horror and pressure by drinking heavily. His world is disrupted by the arrival of a naive young officer, Second Lieutenant Raleigh, who idolizes Stanhope from their school days and has used his influence to be posted to Stanhope's company. The play explores the psychological toll of war, the bonds of camaraderie, and the fragile facade of courage maintained in the face of imminent death.

The narrative arc follows the daily routines and tense waiting in the dugout, punctuated by raids, shelling, and the constant threat of death. The central conflict revolves around Stanhope's fear that Raleigh will write to his sister (Stanhope's girlfriend) about his drinking, and the strained relationship between the two men. As the German offensive begins, the company faces a near-certain attack. The play culminates in a desperate defense, with Raleigh wounded and dying, and Stanhope's stoic grief. The play ends with the dugout collapsing as the attack intensifies, leaving the fate of the survivors uncertain. *Journey's End* matters because it humanizes the soldiers of WWI, showing their fear, humor, and resilience, and it remains a classic of war literature, often staged and studied for its unflinching portrayal of the psychological costs of combat.

Key Takeaways

- The play shows that the greatest courage often lies in enduring the mundane and terrifying waiting of war, not just in heroic action.
- Alcohol is used by Stanhope as a crutch to maintain his sanity and leadership, revealing how soldiers coped with trauma.
- The arrival of an idealistic young officer like Raleigh highlights the contrast between pre-war innocence and the brutal reality of the trenches.
- The relationship between Stanhope and Raleigh demonstrates how war can strain even the strongest bonds of admiration and friendship.
- The play underscores the arbitrary nature of death in war, where a random shell can end a life without warning.

- Sherriff's realistic dialogue and setting show that the true horror of war is often the waiting and the psychological pressure, not just the fighting.
- The character of Osborne, the 'uncle' figure, represents the quiet, selfless leadership that holds the company together.
- The final scene, with the dugout collapsing, leaves the audience with a sense of the overwhelming and inescapable destruction of war.

Chapter Summaries

Act I

The play opens in a British dugout near the front lines in March 1918. Captain Hardy is preparing to hand over command to Captain Stanhope. Stanhope arrives with his officers, including Osborne, Trotter, and Hibbert. Stanhope is tense and immediately asks for whisky. The conversation reveals that Stanhope has been at the front for three years and is respected but feared. A new officer, Second Lieutenant Raleigh, arrives, having requested to be posted to Stanhope's company. Stanhope is disturbed by Raleigh's arrival because Raleigh knew him before the war and is the brother of Stanhope's girlfriend. Stanhope fears Raleigh will write home about his drinking. The act ends with the men preparing for the night, and Stanhope's anxiety about Raleigh's presence is palpable.

Act II, Scene I

The next morning, the men are in the dugout. Trotter is eating, and Osborne is reading. Raleigh is present, and he and Osborne talk about Stanhope. Raleigh expresses his admiration for Stanhope, but Osborne hints that Stanhope has changed. Stanhope enters, hungover and irritable. He confronts Raleigh about writing letters home, demanding to censor them. Raleigh is shocked and hurt. Stanhope reveals his fear that Raleigh will tell his sister about his drinking. The tension between them is high. Later, a raid is planned for that night, and Stanhope volunteers to lead it. The act ends with the men preparing for the raid, and Stanhope and Raleigh's relationship remains strained.

Act II, Scene II

The dugout is quiet as the men wait for the raid. Osborne and Raleigh talk, and Osborne gives Raleigh advice about the raid. They share a moment of camaraderie. The raid begins, and the men hear gunfire. Osborne and Raleigh go over the top. The men in the dugout wait anxiously. News comes that the raid was successful, but Osborne was killed. Raleigh returns, shaken, and reports that Osborne died. Stanhope is devastated but tries to maintain composure. The act ends with Stanhope receiving orders for a major German attack expected the next day. The men are exhausted and fearful.

Act III, Scene I

The next morning, the men are preparing for the expected German attack. Stanhope is drinking heavily. Hibbert, who has been complaining of neuralgia, tries to leave, but Stanhope forces him to stay, accusing him of cowardice. Stanhope threatens to shoot him if he tries to desert. Hibbert breaks down, but Stanhope offers him a chance to stay with dignity. The two men reconcile. Raleigh is also present, and he and Stanhope have a brief, tense conversation. The men receive word that the attack is imminent. The act ends with the men bracing for the assault, and Stanhope giving orders for the defense.

Act III, Scene II

The German attack begins. The dugout is hit by a shell, and the men are trapped. Raleigh is wounded in the back and is brought into the dugout. Stanhope tends to him, and they have a brief, emotional conversation. Raleigh dies. Stanhope is grief-stricken but must continue to lead. The men are ordered to retreat, but Stanhope decides to stay and fight. The dugout collapses as another shell hits, and the play ends with the stage directions indicating the sound of a falling timber and a final cry. The fate of the survivors is left uncertain.

Themes

- Courage and fear
- The futility of war
- Camaraderie and brotherhood
- The psychological toll of combat
- Class and social hierarchy
- The loss of innocence

Notable Quotes

- "I'm not going to be beaten by a little thing like that. I'm going to stick it out. I'm going to see it through." — Stanhope says this to Osborne, expressing his determination to endure the war despite his fear and exhaustion.
- "It's all right, Raleigh. It's all right. You're going to be all right." — Stanhope comforts Raleigh as he lies dying in the dugout after being wounded.
- "I'm afraid I'm not much of a hand at writing letters." — Osborne says this to Raleigh when discussing writing home, showing his modesty and the difficulty of expressing war experiences.
- "I've been here three years. I've been here three years, and I'm still alive." — Stanhope says this to Raleigh, highlighting the incredible endurance and luck required to survive the war.
- "It's a funny thing. You know, I've never been so frightened in my life." — Trotter says this during the raid, revealing the universal fear experienced by soldiers despite their outward

bravado.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Journey's End about?

Journey's End is a play set in the trenches of World War I, focusing on a group of British officers in a dugout over four days in March 1918. It explores their fear, camaraderie, and psychological struggles as they await a German offensive. The central conflict involves Captain Stanhope's alcoholism and his relationship with a young officer, Raleigh, who idolizes him.

Is Journey's End worth reading?

Yes, Journey's End is widely considered a classic of war literature. It offers a realistic and moving portrayal of soldiers' experiences in WWI, with strong character development and tension. Its themes of courage, fear, and the human cost of war remain relevant. It is also a quick read, making it accessible to students and general readers.

How does Journey's End end?

Spoiler: The play ends with the German attack in progress. Raleigh is wounded and dies in the dugout, with Stanhope comforting him. The dugout is hit by a shell and collapses, and the fate of the remaining characters is left uncertain. The final stage directions suggest the destruction of the dugout and the overwhelming force of the war.

Who should read Journey's End?

Journey's End is ideal for students of literature and history, especially those studying World War I. It also appeals to readers interested in psychological drama and character-driven stories. Theatre enthusiasts will appreciate its realistic dialogue and structure. Anyone seeking a powerful, concise anti-war narrative will find it compelling.

How long does it take to read Journey's End?

Journey's End is a short play, typically around 80-100 pages. At an average reading speed of 250 words per minute, it takes about 1-2 hours to read. Most readers can finish it in a single sitting, making it a quick but impactful read.