

Additional Resources – Reading Comprehension

The Lie

Read the text and answer the questions below.

1. How would you describe William's mood as he left the Village? Which words give you this idea?

2. How does the writer describe the weather on the day that William left? How does that affect the mood of the text?

3. How is James described to the reader?

4. What does the word 'conscription' mean?

5. In paragraph eight, the writer doesn't tell us exactly what James is finding. Why do you think that might be?

6. Where did the white feathers first start appearing?

7. What do white feathers symbolise?

8. Why didn't James sign up at the same time as his brother?

9. Some paragraphs are only one sentence long. Why do you think the author did this?

10. How do you think James felt when he was handed the white feather? Explain why.

11. Do you think James had already considered signing up before the white feather was given to him? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

The Lie

William left on a Friday.

It was a balmy afternoon when William, along with several other the men from the village, left for the front line. With a wave and a wink to his younger brother James, he was gone.

Although James was the younger of the two brothers, he didn't look it. At eleven years old, James had caught his brother up in height, and at thirteen, he had overtaken him. Now, with William eighteen and James just fifteen, it was James who was the stronger, broader and more athletic of the brothers. Much to William's annoyance.

But despite their differences in appearance, it was William who had been conscripted, leaving James behind. It was William who had sat on a boat navigating the English Channel. It was William who now sat in the trenches in France or Belgium somewhere.

In the weeks that followed, the village had felt smaller to James. Quieter. He busied himself most days, and had taken on his brother's chores at home and his jobs around the village. But it was getting tedious. James dreamt of the adventures that William was having – defending Britain, standing shoulder to shoulder with his comrades as they went 'over the top'. James longed to be with him. But he wasn't allowed. The Government had stated that 'single male citizens aged between 18 and 40 years old were liable to be called up for military service'. Kitchener wanted men. Not boys.

This ruled James out.

James now had a new routine. Every morning he would race his bike down the steep hill into the village, over the small bridge and grind to a halt at the front of Cripps' Grocery. After wheeling his bike around the back he would always pause before he went in, standing and staring at the village hall. On Fridays, the hall turned into a recruitment office for soldiers. When called up, if they hadn't already volunteered, young men would make their way to the recruiting office for their medical, where workers took note of a man's height and chest measurements. They also asked their age.

But this new routine only lasted a few weeks. At first James didn't really notice them turning up. He just supposed they had blown in on the breeze or had

tangled in someone's clothes to fall onto the shop floor. But as the weeks wore on, more and more would appear. He would find small ones on his bicycle seat and tangled in the spokes of his wheels. He knew what they symbolised, but he hadn't realised they had been left for him. James didn't notice that people had been taunting him.

White feathers.

The symbol of cowardice. People thought James was a coward. After all, he was the broader, taller, stronger brother. Why shouldn't he be on the front line alongside William? To look at, one would assume that James was the older of the two, so why was this perfect specimen of a soldier cowering in a shop in the middle of the lush green English countryside?

The final straw came one Thursday. James had spent the morning racing all over the village with deliveries and was now in the shop behind the counter. He had just served a young lady.

He'd been courteous and made sure she had everything she needed. He totalled up the goods in the bag and asked the well-dressed young woman for payment. Out of her pocket, instead of the money, she drew a long, perfectly white feather, laid it on the counter and turned, leaving the shop and the bag of groceries still on the counter.

The next morning, James raced into the village as usual. Down the steep hill and over the bridge. But instead of pulling up outside the shop, James crossed the street to the village hall. It was Friday, he could sign up. His heart raced, not just from the bike ride, but from the lie he was about to tell. The man in uniform took his height and chest measurement, "You're just what we're looking for," he stated. "How old are you, son?"

"Eighteen," James lied.