The Rear-Guard
BY SIEGFRIED SASSOON

Groping along the tunnel, step by step,
He winked his prying torch with patching glare
From side to side, and sniffed the unwholesome air.

Tins, boxes, bottles, shapes and too vague to know;
A mirror smashed, the mattress from a bed;
And he, exploring fifty feet below
The rosy gloom of battle overhead.

Tripping, he grabbed the wall; saw someone lie
Humped at his feet, half-hidden by a rug.
And stooped to give the sleeper’s arm a tug.
“I’m looking for headquarters.” No reply.
“God blast your neck!” (For days he’d had no sleep.)
“Get up and guide me through this stinking place.”
Savage, he kicked a soft, unanswering heap,
And flashed his beam across the livid face
Terribly glaring up, whose eyes yet wore
Agony dying hard of ten days before;
And fists of fingers clutched a blackening wound.

Alone he staggered on until he found
Dawn’s ghost that filtered down a shafted stair
To the dazed, muttering creatures underground
Who hear the boom of shells in muffled sound.
At last, with sweat and horror in his hair,
He climbed through darkness to the twilight air,
Unloading hell behind him step by step.

Language Features + Meanings
• **Rhyme** - All the orange words rhyme with another orange word. Rhyming seems to get a meaning across to the reader and gives the poem a certain type of structure.
• “**Tins, boxes, bottles, shapes and too vague to know**” - Listing - This is used to emphasise the extent of something; shows that the author has a wide knowledge of the topic.
• “**Step by Step**” - Repetition - Used at the end of the first and last sentence of the poem. Repetition is used to draw the reader to a particular idea or phase.
• “**Terribly glaring up, whose eyes yet wore Agony dying hard of ten days before**” - Enjambment - In poetry, an idea continues onto the next line without punctuation, this helps to intensify what the poet is trying to get across.

This poem sets a tone/mood that makes the reader get an image in their head of what war really was, the reality of war.

Biography: Siegfried Sassoon, born 8 September, 1886 Kent, England, was an English poet, writer and soldier. Motivated by patriotism, Sassoon joined the British Army just as the threat of a new European war was recognised, and was in service with the Sussex Yeomanry on 4 August 1914, the day the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland declared war on Germany. Sassoon survived the war, however later died 1st September 1967 of Stomach Cancer, a week before his 81st birthday.

In Sassoon’s poem, “The Rear-Guard,” he is expressing the idea that the reality of war was very gory and nightmarish. This is expressed by Sassoon describing the state of what one of the bunkers within the trenches looked like to the soldier in the poem. He describes the bunker as being messy, filthy and just a completely trashed look. Sassoon expressed this idea because he wanted his audience to understand what he and many more men had to go through.

The idea of including the fact that the soldier in the poem found another soldier, but dead, really makes the audience feel the gruesomeness and insaneness of what went on in the war. This idea is valid because what Sassoon describes the battlefield to be like was no where near far from the truth. In fact, it might be possible that the soldier described in his poem might actually be him and that finding a dead soldier in one of the bunkers was an experience that he had. The significance of this idea to us today is that we must be truly grateful that people in our days have a choice in whether they want to go to war or not and that we are all given the chance to live long, happy and healthy lives, whereas the poor boys and men back in 1914+ didn’t have a chance in whether they wanted to put their lives at huge risk or not.