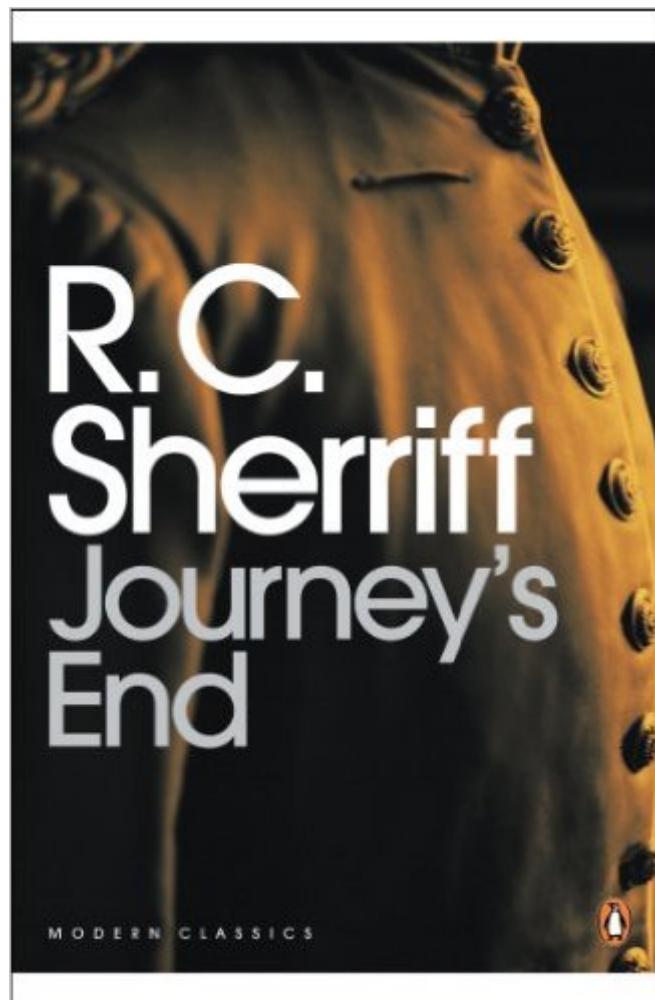


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Modern Classics Journeys End (Modern Classics (Penguin))



Synopsis

Hailed by George Bernard Shaw as 'useful [corrective] to the romantic conception of war', R.C. Sherriff's *Journey's End* is an unflinching vision of life in the trenches towards the end of the First World War, published in Penguin Classics. Set in the First World War, *Journey's End* concerns a group of British officers on the front line and opens in a dugout in the trenches in France. Raleigh, a new eighteen-year-old officer fresh out of English public school, joins the besieged company of his friend and cricketing hero Stanhope, and finds him dramatically changed. Laurence Olivier starred as Stanhope in the first performance of *Journey's End* in 1928; the play was an instant stage success and remains a remarkable anti-war classic. R.C. Sherriff (1896-1975) joined the army shortly after the outbreak of the First World War, serving as a captain in the East Surrey regiment. After the war, an interest in amateur theatricals led him to try his hand at writing. Following rejection by many theatre managements, *Journey's End* was given a single performance by the Incorporated Stage Society, in which Lawrence Olivier took the lead role. The play's enormous success enabled Sherriff to become a full-time writer, with plays such as *Badger's Green* (1930), *St Helena* (1935), and *The Long Sunset* (1955); though he is also remembered as a screenplay writer, for films such as *The Invisible Man* (1933), *Goodbye Mr Chips* (1933) and *The Dam Busters* (1955). If you enjoyed *Journey's End*, you might like Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That*, available in Penguin Modern Classics. 'Its unrelenting tension, and its regard for human decency in a vast world of human waste, are impressive and, even now, moving' Clive Barnes

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Customer Reviews

"Journey's End" may be wedded to a particular place and time, but its insights and economical stagecraft work to deliver a still-searing emotional journey. In the middle of World War I, five British officers and their company are assigned a hot sector of the Western Front. Their commander, Captain Stanhope, is a battle-hardened leader of uncommon reliability, but after too much combat time, also a self-hating drunk in the safety of his dugout. He must prepare his company for a big German attack while also dealing with a ghost from his own past, a young officer named Raleigh who looked up to Stanhope before the war and now perhaps wonders what became of his old hero. R. C. Sherriff's 1929 play sounds familiar themes about the pain of war and the stupidity of sending young men off to die in order to satisfy their superiors' momentary whims. These themes have been used to death in the years since, in everything from Stanley Kubrick's film "Paths Of Glory" to the conclusion of the British TV series "Blackadder." You can't penalize "Journey's End" for getting there early, though its originality doesn't make those themes any fresher. War is hell. We get it. What makes "Journey's End" work for me is how its characters interact, believably real and conversational despite the playwright's observing the necessities of an acted drama. We only have one setting, an officer's dugout beneath a trenchline, and only a handful of characters to follow, yet Sherriff makes the most of his spare set and cast. An experienced playwright by the time he wrote this, as well as a World War I veteran, Sherriff makes sure to present his characters in various combinations in order to draw out their personalities, their quirks, and their humor.

I picked up JOURNEY'S END because it was touted as "a great anti-war classic." It is a three-act play, set in a dugout in the British trenches in March 1918. C Company, commanded by Captain Stanhope, has just moved into the trenches for a six-day rotation. A major German assault is expected shortly, before C Company's six-day front-line tour is over. The entire play occurs in the dugout, although there are reports of various developments outside the dugout, as well as the sounds of artillery and machine-gun fire, eerie and flashing lights, and calls of "stretcher-bearer." Most of the play consists of exchanges among Stanhope and his four officers - Osborne, older and wiser and nicknamed "Uncle"; Trotter, fat, happy-go-lucky, and somewhat simple; Hibbert, scared to death and feigning neuralgia in an attempt to obtain a medical discharge; and Raleigh, freshly arrived at the front from public school, good-looking, eager, and innocent, and the brother of Stanhope's girlfriend back in England. As for Stanhope, he is both extremely dedicated and thoroughly jaded; he has been on the Western Front for three years and is on the verge of a break-down; the only way he lives through the constant strain is by being doped with

whiskey. By the final curtain, the journey through life of two of the five principal characters has come to an end. The play touches on many of what are now conventional themes of British literature of the Western Front: vainglory; malingering; foolhardy missions; inflexibility and callousness on the part of the upper brass; rats and often execrable food; and boredom punctuated by moments of paralyzing fear. Other works, in my opinion, explore those themes better.

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