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The Poetic Witness: Owen and Sassoon's Perspective on the Human Condition in WWI

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Introduction

In this thesis I discuss the impact of *War Poets* on the perception of war and the human condition. The poets I choose were active during the First and Second World Wars and wrote works that reflect their direct experiences in battle and the profound emotions associated with armed conflict. Amid the trench warfare, chemical attacks, and relentless brutality of the unprecedented conflict that World War I brought to European consciousnesses, soldiers found solace and catharsis in the written word. Their poetry served as a powerful medium to challenge the glorification of warfare and the propaganda of the time. By vividly depicting the suffering and trauma experienced by soldiers, many poets from many of the nations involved confronted the harsh realities of battle, ultimately questioning the values and decisions that led to such carnage. It was in the midst of that chaos and devastation that two remarkable British poets, Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, emerged as poignant voices of their generation, capturing the profound human experiences of the war through their powerful verses, which transcend mere literary expression and serve as a testament to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of unimaginable adversity.

Chapter 1 provides a historical and cultural context for the First World War and the societies in which *War Poets* lived. It explores the social, political, and artistic influences that contributed to the emergence of this form of poetic expression. The *Great War* left an indelible mark on humanity, reshaping not only the geopolitical landscape but also the artistic and literary realms. This chapter serves as a pivotal gateway into the intricate tapestry of historical and cultural circumstances that enveloped these poets and the societies they inhabited. I try to uncover the intricate interplay of social, political, and artistic influences that gave birth to this compelling form of poetic expression. By contextualizing the tumultuous times and the creative spirits that thrived within them, the aim is to unravel the profound connections between WWI and the poetic voices that arose from its midst. In doing so, I lay the groundwork for a comprehensive exploration of the *War Poets* and their enduring impact on literature and society.

Chapter 2 presents one of the most iconic British War Poets, Wilfred Owen, born on March 18, 1893, in the town of Oswestry, Shropshire, England, whose life was intimately bound to the tumultuous era in which he lived. His upbringing in a middle-class family, marked by a strong emphasis on education and culture, laid the foundation for his intellectual pursuits. His formative years in a series of schools, including the Birkenhead Institute and the Shrewsbury Technical School, and the influence of Romantic poets such as Keats, in particular, not only exposed him to the rich literary heritage of the English language, but also allowed him to develop a keen sense of critical thinking and analysis. The early 20th century marked a period of significant upheaval across Europe, with geopolitical tensions and alliances culminating in the outbreak of World War I in 1914, in which a wave of patriotism and fervor swept through Britain, resulting in many British citizens enlisting in the army. Owen felt a strong sense of duty and joined the *Artists' Rifles* in October 1915; his initial enthusiasm for military service was fueled by the prevailing propaganda that portrayed the war as a heroic endeavor. However, the realities of trench warfare on the Western Front would soon shatter these illusions. His deployment to France in early 1917 exposed him to the horrors of modern warfare - gas attacks, relentless shelling, and the profound psychological toll on soldiers. It was on the battlefield that Owen's perception of the war underwent a profound transformation. By analysing his relevant poems, including "Dulce et decorum est" and other selected ones, I try to provide new ways for understanding the *Great War* describing what the poet has seen, that is the harsh reality buried in our past which can be only read by our contemporary generations. It was through his writing that he sought to convey the stark realities of war and to challenge the prevailing narratives that glorified it, indeed, his poems would become a powerful indictment of the senseless brutality of World War I. Reflecting upon the cataclysmic events of the First World War described through Owen's pen, one is compelled to confront the darker facets of human nature - the relentless pursuit of power, the disregard for human life, and the enduring legacy of pain. The last element I discuss in the chapter is 'the sense of touch' in Owen's poetry, described in a dedicated chapter of Santanu Das' *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature*, an original and

evocative study on the relationship between physical pain and its transmission through reflexes of sound.

Chapter 3 features an in-depth analysis of Siegfried Loraine Sasson, who stands as a testament to the power of poetry to bear witness to the human experience during times of profound upheaval. Born in 1886 in Matfield, Kent, into a world steeped in Victorian sensibilities, he was educated at Marlborough College and later at Clare College, Cambridge. His upbringing seemed to foretell a life of leisure and privilege. However, the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 shattered the illusions of a whole generation. Just as well as for Owen, inspired by patriotism and duty, he enlisted as a cavalry officer, initially embracing the glory and heroism that war promised. Little he knew that the *Great War* would be the crucible in which his identity and poetic voice were forged. His experiences on the Western Front, where he encountered the grim reality of trench warfare, would profoundly change him and his disillusionment with the war's senseless brutality, the loss of comrades, and the emotional toll of battle, ignited a fervent anti-war sentiment within him. Throughout the chapter, I analyze his poetry, both stylistically and as far as the profound impact of war on his literary endeavors and the lasting impression he has left on the world of literature are concerned. "The General" and "Soldier's Declaration" are the relevant poems I discuss about in order to provide valuable insights into the psychological and emotional impact of war on individuals and society as a whole. Furthermore, the consistent themes of disillusionment and protest in these works make them powerful examples of anti-war literature.

In conclusion, in this dissertation, I attempt to summarize the key findings from the analysis of the works presented in the previous chapters and their impact on the perception of war and humanity. Thus grounded in personal experiences on the front lines, Owen and Sassoon offer a unique lens through which we can analyze the complex dimensions of the human condition during the First World War thanks to their letters and poems. Indeed, through their words, they bear witness to the physical and psychological trauma of war, reflecting on the moral and ethical dilemmas it imposed on individuals and society at large, as to ensure that the world could never view war the

same way again, forcing us to confront its grim realities and advocate for a more peaceful world.

CHAPTER 1

The First World War: Shaping Society, Politics, and Literature

1.1 The Great War: Social and Economic Transformations

The First World War was a cataclysmic event that altered the course of history, reshaping the world in profound ways. Its impact extended far beyond the battlefields, leaving an indelible mark on society, politics, and the arts. In the realm of politics, the First World War challenged existing power structures and international alliances. Beyond the well-documented political and economic ramifications, the war has left an indelible mark on the fabric of society, culture, and literature. The global geopolitical landscape was fundamentally altered, and the consequences of this upheaval would resonate for generations to come. Artistically, the war ushered in a period of innovation and experimentation: traditional literary conventions were reevaluated, and poets sought new ways to convey the harrowing experiences of war. Ted Bogacz, a historian and professor of history at the United States Naval Academy, in his studies on the cultural and psychological impact of WWI in Britain, defined the conflict as:

a war where mechanism in the form of artillery and machine guns dominated soldiers, where the heroic individual was often sunk in a passive mass army, where, indeed, his actions frequently ceased to have meaning at all, and where death was often random, hideous, and futile.¹

The most immediate and heart-wrenching social impact of the First World War was the staggering loss of life, in which millions of soldiers perished in the trenches and countless civilians were also caught in the crossfire. This massive loss of life left deep scars on societies across the globe, leading to an acute sense of collective mourning and trauma. Families were shattered, communities devastated, and entire generations altered forever.

1 T. Bogacz, *A Tyranny of Words: Language, Poetry, and Antimodernism in England in the First World War*, *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. 58, no. 3, 1986, pp. 643-668, pp. 644-645.

Since men were drafted into military service, women stepped into roles traditionally held by men; the war opened up new employment opportunities, particularly in munitions factories, in which women had to face long working hours shifts and the dangerous use of TNT to fill the shells, being soon nicknamed munitionettes.² Because of the social belief according to which only men could work in factories during the pre-WWI era, many women were unskilled, resulting in several devastating explosions in shell-filling factories in which women were killed. They also filled manufacturing and agricultural positions, or provided support as nurses on the front-lines. Although it is impossible to determine the exact number of British women who joined the war, an estimation can be done, listing over 100,000 women recruited during the conflict. In the years of the First World War, in Britain the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) also known as Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps were established in 1916, the Women's Royal Naval Service in 1917 and the Women's Royal Air Force in 1918.³ Furthermore, women's participation in the war effort was not limited to the home front. Some women, driven by a strong sense of patriotism and duty, served as spies and couriers in enemy territory, risking their lives to gather valuable intelligence. Their covert activities contributed to the success of various espionage operations and had a profound impact on the war's outcome. Alongside their fundamental roles as soldiers, many women served as nurses in field hospitals and their dedication to the wounded and the sick was truly remarkable, resulting in countless saved lives,⁴ also providing emotional and material support to the troops.

This newfound independence and responsibility had far-reaching implications for women's emancipation, eventually leading to the suffrage movement and a broader reevaluation of gender roles. However, their contributions during the war proved that women were capable of performing a wide range of tasks traditionally reserved for men. Their sacrifices and contributions during the First World War were undeniable and the

2 P. Fara, *Women, Science and Suffrage in World War I, Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, vol. 69, no. 1, 2015, pp. 11–24, p. 16.

3 <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/12-things-you-didnt-know-about-women-in-the-first-world-war>.

4 On March 1902 Queen Alexandra became president of the Army Nursing Service, established in 1881 and whose name changed in Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service, also known QAIMNS. During the terrible years of the *Great War*, the number of nurses rose from 300 to 10,404. At the end of the Second World War, the name changed in Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps (QARANC). For further information on the association, see: <https://www.qarancassociation.org.uk/Groups/348773/History.aspx>.

growing public support for women's suffrage, became a powerful argument for recognizing their right to vote. Before the First World War, women's suffrage movements were already gaining momentum in various parts of the world, notably in countries like the United Kingdom and the United States. These movements were marked by the tireless efforts of women who sought to challenge deeply entrenched social norms and legal barriers that excluded them from participating in the democratic process and as the war ended, the demand for the suffrage could no longer be ignored. The year 1918 witnessed the United Kingdom granting limited voting rights to women over the age of 30, however, it was not just in the UK that progress was made: other countries, including the United States, Canada, and parts of Europe, began to embrace the idea of women's suffrage, though it was not fully realized in many places until after the war.

Alongside all the social aspects in which men and women, both in cities and on the home-front were involved, one of the most significant challenges faced by the British Government was financing the war, to support the military effort and the consequences of the reindustrialization of factories, which had to produce military machines at a much larger scale and at a much faster rate. Even existing factories that had been producing consumer goods quickly switched to wartime production, for whom, incentives and financial support by the government were required. However, the use of economic embargoes by the Allied Powers⁵ against the Central Powers,⁶ had a profound impact on the course of the war. The embargoes during the conflict were primarily aimed to disrupt the enemy's access to essential goods, such as materials and food, making their import almost impossible. The British Royal Navy implemented naval restrictions against Germany, preventing goods from entering or leaving the country by sea, sorely restricting its access to raw materials and, more importantly, food, causing the widespread of hunger and malnutrition which significantly impacted civilian morale and military effectiveness. The Central Powers, in response to the Allied embargoes, implemented their own measures to secure essential resources, including rationing, resource conservation, and seeking alternative trade partners.

5 The United Kingdom, France, Russia, Italy, Japan and the USA.

6 Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire.

The United States played a crucial role in the economic embargoes against the Central Powers. In 1914, President Woodrow Wilson declared the neutrality of the USA during the conflict by delivering a message to the Congress, but the sinking of the passenger ship Lusitania in 1915 and other events that strained the diplomatic relations between Germany and the USA, led to an official declaration of war on the Central Powers by the United States Congress in April 1917.⁷ When the war began, the U.S. economy was in recession, with an economic expansion recorded by National Bureau of Economic Research from 1914 to 1918. According to Hugh Rockoff, Professor of Economics at Rutgers University in New Jersey:

The long period of U.S. neutrality made the ultimate conversion of the economy to a wartime basis easier than it otherwise would have been. Real plant and equipment were added, and because they were added in response to demands from countries already at war, they were added in precisely those sectors where they would be needed once the U.S. entered the war.⁸

Before joining WWI, the USA were considered as debtors on international capital markets, as during the nineteenth century they had received large amounts of foreign capital from European countries to be used in internal investments. Instead, by the end of the conflict, the States had firmly established themselves as an economic superpower, thanks to their industrial capabilities that combined with their vast resources, positioned them at the forefront of the global economy. Henry Ford's assembly line, which had been in use since 1913 and whose concept of standardization and specialization in production led to increased output and reduced costs, became a model for manufacturing and had a key role in the economic change, especially during the *Roaring Twenties*, as a direct result of the efficient exchange of goods during the years of the *Great War*. Rockoff then assesses the legacies of WWI for the U.S. economy, stating that New York emerged from the war as “London’s equal if not her superior in the contest to be the world’s leading financial center”⁹. Great Britain faced immense war

7 Woodrow Wilson, *Message to Congress*, 63rd Cong., 2d Sess., Senate Doc. No. 566 (Washington, 1914), pp. 3-4.

8 Hugh, Rockoff, *Until It's over, over There: the US Economy in World War I*, in *The Economics of World War I*, edited by Stephen Broadberry and Mark Harrison, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, pp. 310-343, pp. 311-312.

9 *Idem*, p. 335.

debt and a drained economy after the conflict, the war had accelerated its relative economic decline, however, the Treaty of Versailles and the war reparations imposed on Germany created economic uncertainties in Europe, affecting British economic interests. The aftermath of the war saw the United States provide financial assistance through the Dawes Plan to help stabilize the European economy, further solidifying their economic leadership.

1.2 An Introduction to First World War Poetry

War has always been a subject of profound human concern used by poets to capture and communicate the complex and often harrowing realities of conflict with an array of emotions, from the exhilaration of victory to the devastation of loss. British war poetry, in particular, has a rich and enduring tradition that spans centuries, offering a unique insight into the human condition during times of war. The outbreak of World War I in 1914 marked a turning point in the history of British war poetry and its brutality left an indelible mark on the poets who experienced it first-hand. The trenches of the Western Front became a crucible for the creation of some of the most powerful and enduring war poetry in the English language. Throughout the war, many poems were published in journals such as the *Times* or the *Daily Mail*, in which a euphemistic and spiritualized language was used, resulting in being incongruous and unable to describe plainly the terrible realities of war. Paul Fussell, an American cultural and literary historian and critic, analyzed the poems, letters and diaries written in the trenches and called this inflated language *high diction*,¹⁰ referring to an “elevated rhetoric in which so much that was written about the war was couched”¹¹.

European writers and intellectuals justified their nation’s wartime actions, as war was initially seen as an opportunity to destroy the cultural apathy.¹² To understand the meaning of cultural apathy originally presented in Roland N. Stromberg’s study *Redemption by War: Intellectuals and 1914*, I intend to discuss the *Belle Époque* in

10 P. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Oxford University Press, 1975.

11 T. Bogacz, *op. cit.*, p. 644.

12 C. Prochasson, *Intellectuals and Writers*, in *A Companion to World War I*, edited by John Horne, Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2010, pp. 323-337. p. 326.

Britain, which anticipates the outbreak of WWI. The *Belle Époque* is considered as a period of significant cultural and social transformation, whose origins are set in France during the last decades of the nineteenth century. During those years, Britain was characterized by remarkable economic prosperity mostly driven by its vast colonial empire, which spanned all around the globe following the sense of duty and responsibility to civilize the territories, allowing the colonizing country to import and export goods. Were also made numerous scientific and technological improvements, such as the development of the steam engine and electrical power, which made life more convenient. However, the apathy I was referring to went beyond the idea of wonder of the *Belle Époque* and can be seen in literature, art and in the way war was perceived by the society. Governments on all sides of the conflict used propaganda to mobilize their populations and build a sense of nationalistic pride. This propaganda often downplayed the brutal realities of war, depicting it as a heroic and noble effort, skewing the public perception of the war and leading to a lack of awareness of its horrors. Even literature was influenced by the national propaganda: Rupert Brooke, in one of his poems called *The Soldier*, idealized war and sacrifice, perpetuating a sense of heroism and honor.

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England's, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,
A pulse in the eternal mind, no less
Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;
Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;
And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,
In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

Rupert Brooke ¹³

In my opinion, this can be considered as an example of *high diction* or inflated language mentioned respectively by Fussell and Bogacz in their poems, as there are no

¹³ R. Brooke, *The Soldier*, in *Poetry*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1915, p. 19.

references to the brutality of war, and because of this, the poem can be seen as a reflection of the early, idealistic sentiments of the war before its true horrors became fully apparent. Indeed, it begins with a declaration of the poet's allegiance to England in line 2, which symbolizes the soldier's belief that even in death, he will carry the essence of his homeland with him. Also death is an important element in the poem: the soldier imagines his own death in a foreign land as a transformation into something eternal, making it become as so spiritual, that his soul will belong to that land. But besides the romantic elements, the language used by Brooke in this specific poem has nothing to do with the ultimate cost and the reality of the conflict.

One of the reasons why Brooke chose not to reflect on war in itself can be the censorship adopted by many governments to shape the narrative on the war to prevent dissent and maintain the war effort. First of all, the press was a primary target for censorship, with strict regulations on newspapers, journals and magazines, which were subjected to approval before publication. However, the manipulation of public opinion through the poeticization of the war in literature, led to many English writers to adapt their speak as to capture the truth about the trenches.

As the war kept lasting, the inflated language became as so absurd, that it is believed that only through its rejection, English war poets were able to enclose their true feelings about the war, showing how life in the trenches really looked like.¹⁴ As stated by James Campbell in his analysis of Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory*, it is difficult to report the terrible conditions in the trenches without having undergone such an experience.¹⁵ The reason why Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and other contemporary poets such as Robert Graves, who witnessed first-hand the brutality of war, are considered as the best example of soldier-poets, is because they have not only refused the traditional patriotic lyrics of the early war, but they have also described the soldier's viewpoint both physically and psychologically in a realistic way. The banal spiritualities of pre-war language have been refused throughout their lyrical evolution, as in Owen's unpublished preface to his poems:

14 T. Bogacz, *op. cit.*, p. 644.

15 J. Campbell, *Combat Gnosticism: The Ideology of First World War Poetry Criticism*, in *New Literary History*, vol. 30, no. 1, 1999, pp. 203–215.

This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them.
Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty,
dominion, or power, except War.

Above all I am not concerned with Poetry.

My subject is War, and the pity of War.

The Poetry is in the pity.

Yet these elegies are to this generation in no sense consolatory. They may be to the
next. All a poet can do today is warn. That is why true Poets must be truthful.

(If I thought the letter of this book would last,

I might have used proper names; but if the spirit of it survives - survives Prussia - my
ambition and those names will have achieved themselves fresher fields than Flanders...)

16

I have willingly decided to include this preface in order to highlight how Owen fought against the “literary illusion” of his times through these powerful lines. It was widely believed that war brought out the best in men: glory, heroism, masculinity, love for the country soldiers belonged to. Behind these poetic features, a profound illusion was hidden. While many poets conveyed the gruesome realities of the conflict, an intricate illusion was in contrast with their trench lyric¹⁷. The trenches are in fact the most common settings in war poetry, whose description of images and situations is far away from the literary techniques of Romantic poetry. The accuracy of the description depends on the writer’s experience in the trenches, meaning that, the more he witnessed, the more he can and must describe truthfully, giving emphasis not on the beauty as required in Romantic poetry, but on the utter reality of the warfare.

Understandably, patriotism had a significant role in creating the illusions in WWI poetry, both guided by the censorship and by the sense of national duty and love for the country, trying to glorify the sacrifice it demanded, in order “to justify sacrifice rather

16 W. Owen, *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*, edited by C. Day Lewis, London, Chatto and Windus, 1963, p. 30.

17 See J. Campbell, *Combat Gnosticism: The Ideology of First World War Poetry Criticism*, in *New Literary History*, vol. 30, no. 1, 1999, pp. 203–215, p. 204.

than encouraging interpretation of deaths as tragic waste”¹⁸. Differently by poets in trenches who described the horrors and sufferings of the warfare, others kept maintaining their initial enthusiasm, encouraging the population to join the war. Thus, many of them wrote with this kind of propagandistic writing during the early days of WWI, but soon realised how terrible the life conditions in the trenches were and changed their points of view.¹⁹

In *Dulce et Decorum Est* Owen criticizes the “old lie”, referring to the noble death on the front-line, seen as an heroic action that would ensure a sense of continuity and permanence for the nation. The last 2 lines of the poem, “The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori”²⁰ are used ironically, highlighting the tragic disparity between the illusion of heroism and the actual horrors of war, as it is a Latin phrase²¹ that translates to “It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country”.

The First World War served as a crucible for the transformation of ideas of heroism, shifting it from a glorified image of valor to the comprehension of the profound costs and sacrifices of war. The disillusionment of war poetry was not universal: many poets were in contrast with the ideology of war because they thought it would bring only destruction; others were in favour, either changing their minds once on the battlefield or keeping loyal to their country and their own views; in contrast, a minority of poets has always been critical towards that war since its beginning and has been much criticized for their pacifist ideas. It must be underlined that some poets unintentionally created illusions and thus deceived people at home about the real nature of war with their inflated language. In my opinion, their being unintentional in describing the realities of war in the way the governments wanted them to, comes from their being human beings with feelings, and fear, from their frustration and the loss of comrades, from their being homesick. During the whole history of literature, especially

18 H. B. McCartney, *The First World War Soldier and His Contemporary Image in Britain*, in *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)*, vol. 90, no. 2, 2014, pp. 299-315, p. 303.

19 T. Tate, *The First World War: British Writing in The Cambridge Companion to War Writing*, edited by Kate McLoughlin, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009, pp. 160-174, p. 164.

20 Blunden, Edmund Charles, et al. *Up the Line to Death: the War Poets, 1914-1918; an Anthology*. Methuen, 1964, p.142.

21 Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori:
mors et fugacem persequitur virum
nec parcat inbellis iuventae
poplitibus timidove tergo. Horace, *Ode III.2.13*.

during Romanticism, poets made references to religious elements to momentarily forget the brutalities of life: wars, diseases, famine and natural disasters. Amidst the chaos, the poet could experience relief and find solace through the romantic imagery of the prewar poetry, creating during the *Great War* a duality of illusion and truth, which reflects the profound impact of the conflict on the human psyche.

CHAPTER 2

Reframing Trauma: Wilfred Owen's Poetic Response to World War I

2.1 Historical Contextualization

Owen's poetry is a very deep and meaningful subject, whose incredible realism is shaped by his personal experience in the First World War. During his youth, he displayed a fascination with poetry and the Romantic tradition, which he employs in his early war poems, thanks to Keats and Shelley's works, from whom Owen took inspiration. As a result of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary by a young nationalist in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914, a dramatic diplomatic crisis crumpled the peace in Europe. Many men were asked to join the conflict through propaganda, which shaped the beliefs and perceptions of the war, but none of them knew that they were facing a huge massacre until it was over in 1918. Soldiers in literature were depicted as heroes, whose sacrifice was seen as a duty, highlighting their bravery and commitment to the cause. However, propaganda and censorship were in contrast with the grim realities of war, contributing to war disillusionment.

Most of the early pre-war poetry still referred to Romantic poetry, whose main stylistic elements were the emphasis on emotions and inner thoughts, individualism, the Sublime, nostalgia and the supernatural. Together with these recurrent Romantic themes, emotions and the poet's inner thoughts kept being a prominent feature in WWI poetry, as can be seen in Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est", a striking example of emotional intensity and a strong rejection of the glorification of war, which I will further analyze in this chapter. However, the idyllic world evoked by the tranquillity of nature, in contrast with the suffering of soldiers, began to fade away once literature finally started portraying war in a more accurate and unvarnished manner, capturing its true nature and horror.

Owen's literary techniques detached from Romanticism when he joined war in 1915, alongside his evolving skepticism towards war and her usefulness and towards his

importance as a simple soldier whose sense of belonging to his motherland led him to enlist in the British infantry. One year before joining war, he wrote “The war effects me less than it ought. I can do no service to anybody by agitating for news or making dole over the slaughter”²².

Witnessing the death and suffering of his comrades transformed him both as a person and as a poet, shaping his perception of war. His meeting with Sassoon in August 1917 was a turning point for Owen’s writing. Thoroughly disillusioned and influenced by the embedded realism in Sassoon’s poetry, he soon realized that glory had nothing to do with dying in war and he started criticizing the poets who depicted warfare as a man’s devotion to his country. While involved in action, he confronted the horrors of the conflict and truthfully described them in his works. He was hospitalized at Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh in June 1917 after displaying symptoms of anxiety disorders and having suffered from shell-shock, which caused illnesses such as sleep disorders, flashbacks and hallucinatory states.²³ Once returned to active duty, after having recovered from shell-shock in 1918, he served until he died at the hands of German machine gunners during the final weeks of WWI at the age of 25. His death is still considered as one of the major losses in the history of English poetry.

2.2 Romantic Elements in Owen's War Poetry: A Reflection on Wordsworth’s and Keats’ Themes

During Owen's lifetime, the Romantic poet John Keats and the Realistic soldier-poet Siegfried Sassoon, both of whom were poets and direct witnesses of the First World War, influenced his views on poetry and how it should express the writer's inner thoughts, thereby shaping his distinctive personal style. In his early poems, Owen used the archaic language traditionally expected in poetry, and he was inspired by Tennyson and Keats in particular.²⁴ John Keats’ poetry was influenced by Wordsworth’ Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, according to which:

22 W. Owen, *Selected Poems and Letters*, edited by Helen Cross, Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 8-9.

23 G. Giordano, *Shell Shock, War Poetry and Psychological Trauma*, *International Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Studies (IAHSS)*, 2020, pp. 102-106, p. 103.

24 W. Owen, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

poetry should be rooted in real experience and feeling, and written in language that was more like ‘the real language of men’. Poetry did not have to be about ‘special’ subjects or famous people, but could feature ‘incidents and situations in common life’, and nature should be the main source of inspiration.²⁵

Wordsworth affirmed that poetry should be written in “the real language of men”²⁶, meaning that an artificially elevated language could not capture the most profound and sublime moments of human experience. His aim was to share his experience and his thoughts with the reader by using a more accessible a familiar language, as to ensure that the true essence of the poem would be captured and a profound connection between reader and poet would be created. He believed that poetry should capture and preserve the authenticity of common people, finding a source of genuine emotions, uncorrupted by artificial social norms, in ordinary situations of everyday life, and by using plain language to depict these experiences, he believes that he can elevate the ordinary to the extraordinary. This idea is strictly connected to Romanticism, whose poets reflect on the expression of emotions through art and literature as a way to a deeper self-awareness and a way to connect with the human experience in a more elevated level.

To continue analysing the major features in Wordsworth’s poetry, which then reflect in Keats and Owen’s works, I have to mention the concept of nature,²⁷ one of the most important themes in the whole Romantic poetry, alongside the Sublime. Wordsworth is considered one of the greatest English nature-poets, as his poetry is characterized by a sense of the ordinary and a profound coexisting in harmony. In *Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*, the poet reflects on his intense connection with nature, describing how the memory of the place, which he has previously visited five years before writing this poem, has been a source of solace during the absence.

Five years have past; five summers, with the length
Of five long winters! and again I hear
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs
With a soft inland murmur.—Once again

25 W. Owen, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

26 *Ibid.*

27 See R. Pite, *Wordsworth and the Natural World, The Cambridge Companion to Wordsworth*, edited by Stephen Gill, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, pp.180-195.

Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
Which on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.²⁸

The connection between nature and the human spirit is highlighted by the sense of isolation and quiet contemplation while observing the landscape “with the quiet of the sky”²⁹, evoking a sense of isolation in which the writer can find solace and inspiration. There is also a background noise given by the “waters, rolling from their mountain-springs, with a soft inland murmur”³⁰, whose idea is seen as a flowing river in an harmonious nature. Memory plays a crucial role in the poem, as the poets reflects on how the impact of the passage of time shaped his perception of the natural world surrounding him.

“Keats was only the first to sense the value of comparing his ‘poetical Character’ to Wordsworth’s”³¹. Both poets share a profound connection with nature as a source of inspiration and reflection on the human condition, however, Keats is particularly renowned for his attention to beauty and sensuality, which manifest through a vivid imagery and a rich language. Indeed, he developed a distinctive style that departs from Wordsworth's spirituality to focus on sensory beauty and emotional richness. While Wordsworth places strong emphasis on the self as the source of his poetic power, Keats takes a different approach by reframing his questions in terms that allow for detached speculation. His explorations are rooted in the worlds of mythology, literature, art, and legend, diverging from the reliance on the language of tangible, firsthand experiences.³²

In 1911, when Owen discovered John Keats’ works, he started feeling close to him, inspired by the Greek and Roman myth towards the pastoral world as a source of inspiration for the poet.³³ In Romantic poetry, the term ‘pastoral’ is strictly connected with ‘rural’ and ‘simplicity’, therefore aligns with Wordsworth’s solace and spiritual

28 W. Wordsworth, *Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the WYE during a Tour, July 13, 1798*, in *Lyrical Ballads, with a Few Other Poems*, London, 1798, pp. 201-202, lines 1-8.

29 *Idem*, p. 201, line 8.

30 *Ibid*, lines 3-4.

31 S. J. Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence: Wordsworth, Keats, and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry*, Cornell University Press, London, 1986, p. 31.

32 S. J. Wolfson, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

33 W. Owen, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

renewal experienced through the connection with an uncorrupted world, hence without the afflictions of everyday life.

The pursuit of pure beauty - the Sublime-, the personal introspectiveness described with the use of a rich vocabulary and the references to mythological characters from classical literature, are the main stylistic Wordsworthian elements that Owen employs in his literature, though during his evolution, some of them became irrelevant, such as the mythological creatures, while the pursuit of beauty was replaced by the terrible description of WWI, consisting in a radical change in his whole poetry.³⁴

2.3 Wilfred Owen's Poetic Evolution: From Devotion to Dissent

Another great influence on Owen's poetry was the meeting with Harold Monro, which occurred in 1916. Before meeting Monro, one of the most important representatives of Georgian poetry, Owen had already read his critical collection of poems *Before Dawn* in which the author criticized the Church and proposed a new society where supernatural was not contemplated, resulting in the creation of a complexity of human beings responsible for their own fate.³⁵

Since he was a teenager, Owen developed a particular sympathy for Christian religion thanks to his devoted mother, becoming a Parish Assistant at Dunsden, Oxfordshire, where he started feeling compassion for the poor and sick parishioners he encountered.³⁶ By experiencing the terrible realities of the *Great War*, he realized how the Church was indifferent to the sufferings of men; moreover, it believed that God was sending men to the front in order to purify the world from the Devil, and was convinced that the political leaders of Europe acted in God's will. Especially this last concept is firmly criticized in *The Parable of the Old Man and the Young*.

So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,
And took the fire with him, and a knife.
And as they sojourned both of them together,
Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,

34 W. Owen, *op. cit.*, pp. 123-124.

35 *Idem*, pp. 127-128.

36 *Idem*, p. 118.

Behold the preparations, fire and iron,
But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?
Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,
And builded parapets and trenches there,
And stretchèd forth the knife to slay his son.
When lo! an Angel called him out of heaven,
Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,
Neither do anything to him. Behold,
A ram caught in a thicket by its horns;
Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.

But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.³⁷

Owen ironically describes a scene from the Old Testament in which God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son as a manifestation of faith towards him. After having set up an altar on which he had to put wood and bind his son Isaac's hands and feet, Abraham is ready to slaughter his son to death, but suddenly God proposes him to kill a ram instead of Isaac. According to the *Bible*, Abraham listens to God and sacrifices the ram, but in Owen's poem, he does not obey and kills the poor boy instead.

The purpose of this 16- lines poem is to emphasize the brutality and the meaningless of WWI by reframing the history of Abraham and his son Isaac. The poet creates a parallelism between what happened in the Old Testament and what was happening in Europe during the years of the conflict, by adding elements of his life at war, such as 'parapets and trenches' in line 8. Also, I would like to focus on the 'Ram of Pride' in line 14 and the figure of the old man in line 15. According to Christian ideology, the sacrifice of the ram in the original story of Abraham is considered as the best representation of devotion towards God, which takes an interesting turn in Owen's.

Throughout its history, society changed attitude towards war, from thinking that it would bring peace and improvements, to thinking that it was only an illusion of power. I need to underline how in our history there have been many anti-war groups which thought that the conflict represented an enormous sacrifice, but they were often ridiculed and considered as a minority in the past societies. The years of the First World War unveiled the horrors people were not aware of before being capable of recognizing

³⁷ *Idem*, pp. 40-41.

how terrible and deadly was life in trenches in which millions of soldiers perished.³⁸ Among the ones who survived, few of them have successfully recovered by their trauma, others suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Disorders or came back home mutilated. And here is the contradiction: being considered as a war veteran has not always been considered as a reason for being grateful to men who, willingly or forced by the government, had to entrust their lives to the Lord, hoping to see their families again. Many of them, after having witnessed the evil of WWI, had to face social inequities, unemployment and even death.

After this parenthesis, I will conclude the analysis of the element of 'Pride' and the 'Old Man', which are strictly connected with what I have already introduced in relation to the social context of the war. The element of pride has been widely criticized by anti-war people, both in WWI and in previous wars. The 'central powers' of a country, along with people supporting the conflict, "held war to be a method for resolving international disputes that was natural, inevitable, honorable, thrilling, manly, invigorating, necessary and often progressive, glorious and desirable"³⁹.

While 'Pride' refers to the idea according to which, as I have analyzed, war was a moral duty and a reason for being proud, the element of the 'Old Man' consists of a parallelism between the Biblical figure of Abrahamaam with the Governments involved in war. The difference stands upon the end of Owen's poem, which slightly differs from the one in the Old Testament. I think that the reason why Owen decided to reframe the story of Abrahamaam, is because he had already developed a critical view on the British Government. In particular, he disapproved of their tendency to choose military engagement over diplomatic efforts in the pursuit of peace. This clarifies the nature of Owen's criticism, since his concern was rooted in the British Government's preference for war rather than diplomacy when seeking peaceful resolutions. While fighting in trenches, he became more and more certain that a true Christian had to pursue pacifism at all costs.⁴⁰ In May 1917, as to justify his lack of confidence towards the Church of his times, he wrote a letter to his mother Susan, which I would like to mention:

38 J. Mueller, *Changing Attitudes towards War: The Impact of the First World War*, *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1991, pp. 1-28, p. 12.

39 *Ibid.*

40 W. Owen, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

I am more and more Christian as I walk the unchristian ways of Christendom. Already, I have comprehended a light which will never filter into the dogma of any national church: namely that one of Christ's essential commands was: passivity at any price! Suffer dishonour and disgrace, but never resort to arms. Be bullied, be outraged, be killed, but do not kill.⁴¹

2.4 A New Approach to Literature: Meeting Sassoon

The last relevant relationship I want to discuss about, is between Owen and Sassoon at the Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh, a psychiatric hospital dedicated to the treatment of shell-shocked soldiers during WWI, built between 1877 and 1880. The atmosphere of the inner corridors was spectral, as they did not receive any natural light during the day, while became even more gloomy during the night, with many patients suddenly crying or screaming.⁴²

Owen was hospitalized at Craiglockhart in 1917 after having displayed symptoms of PTSD in April 1917, in which he was blown in the air by a shell blast and left face to face with one of his companion who died in the assault. He was diagnosed with Neurasthenia, an illness that caused the weakness of the nerves with tremors and moreover, he showed an inability to speak about the war. Therefore, the Battalion Medical Officer ordered an immediate special treatment at Craiglockhart, where Owen remained until October.⁴³

During the therapy , he wrote:

I have just been reading Seigfried Sason, and am feeling at a very high pitch of emotion. Nothing like his trench life sketches has ever been written or ever will be written. Shakespeare reads vapid after these. Not of course because Sassoon is a greater artist, but because of the subjects, I mean.⁴⁴

41 *Idem*, p. 120.

42 J. Stallworthy, *Wilfred Owen*, Oxford New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, pp. 189-190.

43 D. Hipp, *By Degrees Regain[Ing] Cool Peaceful Air in Wonder': Wilfred Owen's War Poetry as Psychological Therapy*, *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2002, pp. 25-49, p. 27.

44 D. Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen: a New Biography*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 2002, p. 263.

The way of using poetry as a method of describing reality with such a powerful and realistic language, astounded Owen, who was very excited by the possibility of meeting him at Craiglockhart. Sassoon, after having witnessed the offensive on the Somme in July 1916, one of the bloodiest battles in history, started believing that the Government could have ended the war by using the diplomatic relationships, instead of sending thousands of men to the front unnecessarily. Because of his unpatriotic behaviour, he was treated like a shell-shocked soldier in need of treatments.⁴⁵ Owen was encouraged by his psychiatrist to pursue his interests and to keep in contact with nature through poetry, whose main subject was war, though described in a conventional way, according to which the war was necessary to stop German invasion. Apart from this, I would like to reiterate that Owen has been always critical towards war as a way to pursue peace and stability in Europe.

The meeting with Sassoon was a breakthrough for Owen's poetry. As I have already mentioned, the difference between Sassoon's and Owen's poetry lies in the way in which the poets convey emotions related to their war experience. While Owen is mostly influenced by Romantic elements such as nature, the Sublime and religion, Sassoon describes his war experience and inner thoughts with a more colloquial and satirical language.⁴⁶

Sassoon's influence can be seen in Owen's shift towards a more direct portrayal of the war, with a focus on the emotional and psychological cost it took on soldiers. Despite this, Owen tends to describe the writer's reflections about a particular situation with either a lyrical or dramatic language to describe the actuality of warfares in trenches and the sufferings they caused to soldiers. In his literary works he employs a variety of viewpoints to examine the situation in which his characters, or himself, are described, indeed, some poems are written in first person, such as *I Saw His Round Mouth's Crimson*, while *Anthem for Doomed Youth* or *Spring Offensive* feature an external presence describing the action.⁴⁷

45 W. Owen, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

46 *Idem*, p. 14.

47 *Idem*, p. 134.

2.5 The Irony and Realism in 'Anthem for Doomed Youth': Owen's Response to War

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,—
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.⁴⁸

This poem was written in September 1917 at the Craiglockhart War Hospital and perfectly represents the collaboration between Owen and Sassoon and shows how effectively Sassoon had influenced Owen with his anti-war and anti-Romanticism ideas in literature. The doomed youth refers to the terrible waste of lives during the conflict, as a result of the absence of diplomacy between the Governments.

The sonnet above is one of the four drafts which have been written by Owen. Initially, it had to be called "*Anthem for Dead Youth*", while in the final version, 'dead' was changed in 'doomed'.

48 E. Blunden, *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1933, p. 80.

FIRST DRAFT

Anthem for Dead Youth

What ^{passing} ~~minute~~-bells for these who die so fast?
 —Only the ^{solemn} ~~the~~ monstrous anger of our guns.
 Let the ^{blind insolence} ~~majestic~~ insults of their ^{iron} ~~iron~~ mouths
 Be as the ^{requiem} ~~priest~~-words of their ^{requiem} ~~burials~~.
 Leave ^{organs for the old} ~~Of~~ choristers and holy music, none;
 Nor any voice of mourning, save the wail
 And the ^{hiss} ~~long-drawn~~ wail of high ^{lonely} ~~far~~-sailing shells.
 to light
 What candles may we hold ~~for~~ these lost? ~~souls?~~
 —Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes,
 shine the ^{tapers} ~~many~~ the holy ^{tapers} ~~many~~ candles
 10 Shall ^{many} ~~many~~ candles; shine; and [?] will ^{light} ~~light~~ them-
 holy flames: to
 And Women's wide-spread arms shall be their wreaths,
 And pallor of girls' cheeks shall be their palls.
 Their flowers, the tenderness of ^{mortal} ~~all~~-men's minds,
^{comrades'} ~~rough~~ men's
 each slow
 And ^{every} ~~every~~ Dusk, a drawing-down of blinds.

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SECOND DRAFT

for
Anthem ~~to~~ Dead Youth

What passing-bells for you who die in herds?
 —Only the monstrous anger of ^{more} ~~more~~ guns!
 —Only the stuttering rifles' rattled words
 Can patter out your hasty orisons.
 5 No chants for you, nor balms, nor wreaths, nor ^{choirs} ~~bells~~
 Nor any voice of mourning, save the ^{choirs} ~~choirs~~,
 shells
 And long-drawn sighs
 The ^{shrill} ~~shrill~~ ^{demented} ~~demented~~ choirs of wailing shells;
 And bugles calling for you from sad shires.
 What candles may we hold to speed you all?
 10 Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
 Shall ^s ~~s~~ and ^{gleams} ~~gleams~~ our
 Shall Shine the holy lights ^{of} ~~of~~ long goodbyes.
 must
 The pallor of girls' brows shall be your pall;
^{comrades'} ~~broken~~ simple frail ^{mortal} ~~mortal~~
 Your flowers, the tenderness of ^{mortal} ~~mortal~~ minds,
^{pain-white} ~~pain-white~~
^{grief-wh} ~~grief-wh~~ ^{innocent} ~~innocent~~
 And each slow dusk, a drawing-down of blinds.

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5 No chants for them, nor wreaths, nor asphodels,
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs
The shrill demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may we hold to speed them all?
10 Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy gleams of their goodbyes.
The pallor of girls' cheeks shall be their pall.
Their flowers the tenderness of silent minds
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

FOURTH DRAFT

Doomed Anthem for ~~Dead~~ Youth

What passing bells for these who die as cattle?
—Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.

5 No { ~~music for all them~~ ~~nor no~~ nor
{ ~~mockeries for them;~~ ~~from prayers~~ ~~or~~ bells
RSD

Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,
ented
The shrill demoniac choirs of wailing shells;
~~disconsolate~~
And bugles calling ~~sad across the shires.~~
for them from sad

What candles may be held to speed them all?
10 Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.
And The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of { ~~silent patient~~
{ ~~sweet white~~ minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

The drafts represent a transitional state of the poem, as before its final version, the sonnet has undergone various changes in form and text. However, the title sets the tone of the poem: the term 'anthem', which refers to music, is strictly connected with the term 'youth'. In a letter to his mother Susan, Owen wrote: "I send you my two best war Poems. Sassoon supplied the title 'Anthem'. Just what I meant it to be"⁵¹. Here Sassoon

50 *Idem*, p. 150.

51 D. Hibberd, *op. cit.*, p. 276.

helped Owen in choosing the most suitable title, choosing ‘Anthem’ as to refer to a ritual, more precisely, to a religious one, with choirs and prayers described as ‘mockeries’ and associated with the grim realities of war, further highlighting its futility and challenging the romanticized image of war with a realistic portrayal of its inhumanity.

The central element of the sonnet is irony: Sassoon not only recommended a more realistic language, but also its use alongside satire. In a more political viewpoint, the anthem can be associated with nationalism, though through the connection with the doomed youth, Owen manages to criticise the institutions for sending young boys to the front, whose majority died in conflict, subverting the use of the anthem as a patriotic symbol into an anti-war message.

The *Anthem* was written with the rhyme scheme set to ABAB in the first quatrain, CDCD in the second, EFFEFG in the sestet. It opens with a direct and rhetorical question: “What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?” The writer addresses the readers asking them to think about the reason why these young soldiers, compared to cattle, are not given a funeral, further giving emphasis to the inhuman conditions they were subject to. The simile ‘as cattle’ was introduced because the first draft of the sonnet, according to Sassoon, could have been initially misunderstood and considered as a statement in support of the war.⁵² The use of alliteration, which consists of the repetition of the same sounds and letters, especially consonants, at the beginning of adjacent connected words, in line 3-4 gives an echo to the sounds of the conflict by repeating the letter ‘r’,⁵³ while in line 14 the music culminates in the dead march given by the alliteration of the letter ‘d’.⁵⁴

In the sestet, religious images are introduced, with the reality of war that can be only seen through the young soldiers’ eyes, hence “the holy glimmers of goodbyes”, stand upon the idea of death that shines in their eyes, taking place of candles in a church. Owen masterfully compares the war-time life and the peace-time life with the image of the ‘patient minds’, whose deep meaning, in my opinion, may lead us to think

52 D. Hibberd, *op. cit.*, p. 270.

53 W. Owen, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

54 P. Cash, *Wilfred Owen in English Association Bookmarks*, The English Association, no.66, 2010, pp. 2-18, p. 9. <https://englishassociation.ac.uk/first-world-war-bookmarks/> Accessed October 25 2023.

of a contrast between the peaceful representation of domestic scenes at home and the tumultuous war-times in which there was no room for peace. In addition, I think that the reason why Owen changed the word 'silent' to 'patient', is to give a much deeper meaning to the concept of peace.

It must be underlined that Owen's most powerful expressions are given by the compassion he feels for the soldiers, which, according to Dominic Hibberd, was intensified by his homosexuality, especially at Craiglockhart.⁵⁵ In the 20th century, it was still considered as a crime, and homosexual writers were forced to hide their 'true identity' as not to be persecuted by the law.

2.6 Between Patriotism and Disillusionment: Analysis of 'Dulce et Decorum Est'

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime.—
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.
If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—

⁵⁵ D. Hibberd, *op. cit.*, p. 268.

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.⁵⁶

Considered as Owen's masterpiece, the poem was written at Craiglockhart in October 1917 and was published in 1920 in Sassoon's and Osbert Sitwell's short collection of Owen's poems, 2 years after he was killed in a German assault just a few days before the war ended.⁵⁷ An introduction to the poem was given in a letter to his mother: "Here is a gas poem, done yesterday, (which is not private, but not final). The famous Latin tag means of course It is sweet and meet to die for one's country. Sweet! And decorous!"⁵⁸

The title, as explained by the author, is a reference to Horace, who considered death as a demonstration of love towards the homeland and used to emphasise the sacrifice of those who lost their lives during a conflict. Yet, Owen mentions Horace not to give the same meaning to the element of death, and he describes that traditional statement as an 'Old Lie'.⁵⁹ As observed by Edmund Blunden and Araujo D. Anderson, the poem embodies another critique towards a 'certain poetess', with a direct reference to Jessie Pope,⁶⁰ English writer whose patriotic jingles supporting war, were in contrast with Owen's vision of the conflict.⁶¹ Having directly witnessed the harsh realities of war, Owen needed to shed light on how idealized was its concept, as it resulted in a fake description of life in trenches and in disillusionment amongst the people. In poetry, death has always been represented as a sleep, with the idea that it can serve as a form of rest, a respite from the trials and tribulations of life. During the First World War instead, its concept was re-evaluated, with Owen and Sassoon for instance, who depicted death as a release from suffering and a brutal end, challenging the glorification

56 E. Blunden, *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*, p. 66.

57 S. Benz, *The Poet as Rhetor: A Reading of Wilfred Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum Est'*, *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 41, no. 3, 2018, pp. 1-17, p. 3.

58 W. Owen, *Collected Letters*, edited by Harold Owen and John Bell, London, Oxford University Press, 1967, pp. 499-500.

59 A. Anderson D., *Jessie Pope, Wilfred Owen, and the Politics of 'pro Patria Mori' in World War I Poetry, Media, War & Conflict*, vol. 7, no. 3, 2014, pp. 326-341, p. 328.

60 A. Anderson D., *op.cit.*, p. 334.

61 E. Blunden, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

of war which was contemplated by other writers such as Jessie Pope herself.⁶² In Blunden's collection of Owen's poems, there is another draft of the poem, which I attach.

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
 Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through
 sludge,
 Till on the clawing flares we turned our backs,
 And towards our distant rest began to trudge,
 Dragging the worst amongst us, who'd no boots
 But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
 Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
 Of tired, outstripped five-nines that dropped behind.

Then somewhere near in front: Whew . . . fup . . .
 fop . . . fup . . .
 Gas shells or duds? We loosened masks in case—
 And listened . . . Nothing . . . Far rumouring of
Krupp . . .

Then smartly, poison hit us in the face.
 Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling,
 Fitting the clumsy helmets, just in time.
 But someone still was yelling out, and stumbling,
 And floundering like a man in fire or lime.

Dim, through the misty panes and heavy light,
 As under a dark sea, I saw him drowning.
 In all my dreams, before my helpless sight
 He lunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

In all your dreams if you could slowly pace
 Behind the limber that we flung him in,
 And watch the white eyes turning in his face,
 His hanging face, like a devil's dead of sin;

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
 Come gargling thick and frothy from the lung;
 And think how once his face was like a bud,
 Fresh as a country rose, and keen, and young,
 You'd not go telling with such noble zest,
 To small boys, ardent for some desperate glory,
 The old lie: Dulce et decorum est
 Pro patria mori.

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The final version differs in structure from the one above: while the final stanza is divided into 28 lines, in the second draft there are 32 lines. In fact, lines 9, 10, 11, 12 are absent in the final version.

Then somewhere hear in front: When, fup, fop, fup
 Gas-shells or duds? We loosened masks in case.
 And listened... nothing... for guns grumbled krupp.
 Then smartly Poison hit us in the face.⁶⁴

62 P. Norgate, *Soldiers' Dreams: Popular Rhetoric and the War Poetry of Wilfred Owen*, *Critical Survey*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1990, pp. 208–215.

63 E. Blunden, *op. cit.*, pp. 123–124.

64 *Idem*, p. 123.

This quatrain has rhyme scheme set to ABAB, with the use of rhymes in lines 1 and 3 and half-rhymes in lines 2 and 4, in which the sound /z/ of ‘case’ slightly differs from the sound /s/ of ‘face’. The main theme of the quatrain is the gas attack, introduced by the onomatopoeia ‘fup, fop, fup’ in line 1, in order to describe the sound of the releasing gas in the air. The rest of the poem has much in common with the older version concerning its structure, although some words change.

Focusing on the final draft, it can be divided into three different sonnets, each one describing a different situation: the first describes a march from line 1 to 8, the second narrates the gas attack from line 9 to 14 and the last one illustrates the recurrent nightmares that Owen had while at Craiglockhart, as a consequence of the spectral environment within the hospital and of the shock due to his experiences at war.⁶⁵

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.⁶⁶

The first 9 lines introduce the image of a group of soldiers on the battlefield, concluding with an anticipation of the gas attack which will be described in the following lines. Before having a closer look at the poem, I want to highlight the choice of the personal pronoun ‘we’ in order to describe a situation in which he had been directly involved. Among the stylistic feature of Owen’s poetry, the use of different viewpoints, from the impersonal to the more personal ones, makes his poems universally relevant, as there is not only a description of what the poet witnessed, but are also recreated situations, images and thoughts belonging to other ‘ordinary people’ like Owen, who found themselves in a real-life nightmare. In *Anthem for Doomed Youth*, the poet describes the scene with the role of an external presence, in *Strange*

65 S. Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p.155.

66 E. Blunden, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

Meeting he confronts the purposelessness of war and lastly, in *Dulce et Decorum Est* he describes a scene in which he has been potentially involved.⁶⁷

In line 1 there is an alliteration with the repetition of the ‘b’ and the image of horror is introduced by a simile in line 2, in which the writer compares the soldiers to ‘coughing hags’, moving on in the following lines giving other physical descriptions such as ‘marched asleep’, ‘blind’ and ‘drunk with fatigue’. In my opinion, these three physical descriptions are connected with each other, having in common the lack of sleep; the soldiers marching asleep, their being blind and their drunkenness may be caused by many hours or days of fighting against the enemy, and the first stanza describes a moment of apparent peace, both physical and psychological. According to Santanu Das, on the other hand, “the whole range of emotional and physical intensities between men in the trenches [...] finds in the poetry of Wilfred Owen one of its most powerful and complex testimonies”⁶⁸.

Das also argues that the status of the body plays an active role in how readers perceive the soldier’s sufferings in war.⁶⁹ Going on with the second stanza of *Dulce et Decorum Est*, a description of a terrible experience is presented, which consists of the main theme of the poem: the gas attack.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound’ring like a man in fire or lime.—

Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.⁷⁰

The scene is introduced with direct speech, with the word ‘gas’ repeated twice and in capital letters the second time, as to ensure that the reader would feel the panick in the soldier’s eyes through their voice. In the first quatrain, the rhyme scheme is ABAB, with the use of the -ing form which increases the climax and the rhythm. Before the *Great War*, using gases during a conflict was unusual. However, during the war-time,

67 W. Owen, *Selected Poems and Letters*, cit., p. 134.

68 S. Das, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

69 *Idem*, p. 153.

70 E. Blunden, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

both the Allies and Central Powers introduced them as a weapon, and although soldiers were trained to survive these attacks, gas masks were not practical, resulting in many men in panic that could not wear them in time, heading for a certain death. Owen describes masks as ‘clumsy helmets’ in line 10. Therefore, the poet manages to describe death by comparing the gas attack to a green sea in which the soldier was perishing and consequently ‘drowning’.

The last part of the poem refers to the recurrent nightmares that Owen had while subject to the ‘special treatment’ at Craiglockhart.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.
If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud.⁷¹

I consider the last 9 lines as a turning point, a sort of fracture in which Owen does not describe the scene anymore, instead, he reflects on the tragic fact that is described as a dream, or better to say, a nightmare. Again, the relationship between sound and the physical description is given by the verbs ‘guttering’, ‘choking’ and ‘drowning’ and made even more clear with the description of the ‘white eyes’ and ‘froth-corrupted lungs’.

The author directly addresses the audience using the personal pronoun ‘you’ at line 17, in the conditional verb tense. ‘If you could pace’, ‘If you could watch’, and ‘If you could hear’ are used in the conditional because he knows that the people at home could not have the chance to experience what Owen himself and his comrades have experienced during the tragic years of war, creating a parallelism between the incapacitated soldiers of the first stanza and the audience, which was unaware of the realities of war.⁷² Though, I do not consider the parallelism as a criticism towards the

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² S. Benz, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

audience, as people's viewpoints on war were distorted by other writers' patriotic verses.

Owen's realism displays both the raw and brutal truth of war and the enduring power of words to awaken our conscience, finding in them a legacy that challenges us to seek peace and to honor the fallen men and women. Wilfred Owen was a man, a soldier, a war poet and an anti-war activist. He served for his country for 3 years, from 1915 to his death in 1918. He was one of many casualties of a diseased society, in which pride, a prosperous economy and the egemony over the world were perceived as worth more than a single life; it was a society in which innocent lives were deemed less valuable than peace; a society in which there was no room for freedom. Nevertheless, Owen used the power of words to uncover the corruption of mankind, in the hope that his words would not be forgotten.

I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
I knew you in this dark: for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
Let us sleep now. . . .⁷³

73 This is a fragment of Owen's *Strange Meeting*, in Blunden, Edmund, et al. *Up the Line to Death : the War Poets, 1914-1918; an Anthology*, edited by Brian Gardner, London, Methuen, 1964, pp. 140-141.

CHAPTER 3

Protest and Patriotism: Siegfried Sassoon's Dual Identity in World War I

3.1 Historical Contextualization

Siegfried Loraine Sassoon was born in 1886 in an Anglo-Jewish family. His father, Alfred Ezra Sassoon, came from a wealthy Baghdadi Jewish merchant family that had made its fortune in India, while Siegfried's mother, Theresa Thornycroft, was the daughter of a successful sculptor. The family lived in a mansion in Kent, in South East England surrounded by art, literature, and music, but despite his privileged upbringing, his early life was marked by his father's death due to tuberculosis when Siegfried was just five years old.⁷⁴ After completing his education at Marlborough College, in which he displayed an early aptitude for poetry that he had probably acquired from his mother's family, he studied at the Clare College in Cambridge and at the Royal Military Academy in Sandhurst. During his formation as a poet, he met fellow writers such as Robert Graves, whose literary techniques were adopted by Sassoon once he joined the war, and Wilfred Owen, met for the first time at Craiglockhart when they were both declared mentally ill and sent to that War Hospital to be treated.

With the outbreak of WWI, Sassoon was enthusiastic and thought that war would bring stability in Europe, though by 1915-1916, he became doubtful about its utility. Learning his brother's death at Gallipoli in 1915 and witnessing first-hand the Battle of the Somme, created a scar in Sassoon's life, making him question the war and feel responsible to tell the truth, that is the purposelessness of WWI with a direct critics against the Governments, which, according to him, sent men to the front instead of quelling the conflict. His critical position towards war was made even more clear with the publication of *A Soldier Declaration*, for which Sassoon was considered mentally unstable. In reality, as underlined by Sassoon himself in *Siegfried's Journey*, the reckless exploits performed in the front line were caused by a progression of emotions which

74 J. S. Roberts, *Siegfried Sassoon*, Metro Publishing, an imprint of John Blake Publishing Ltd, London, 2014, p. 12.

had begun before he was finally diagnosed with shell-shock and PTSD.⁷⁵ Sassoon describes the making of the statement in *Siegfried's Journey, 1916-1920*, underlining his fear for being misunderstood or being considered as a traitor by his officers.⁷⁶ Words became a sequence of declamatory sentences in his mind, further being transcribed: "I believe this War, upon which I entered as a war of defence and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and conquest"⁷⁷. I would like to make a reference to what I have said about the disillusionment, as Sassoon joined the conflict without knowing what he was fighting for; he thought that he was going to fight for his family, for his country, for Europe, against a common enemy, Germany. In reality, he witnessed a pointless carnage with around 10.000.000 casualties.

He then decided to send his statement to Arnold Bennet, a Deputy Minister, who criticised him for his insubordination. Society, after the statement was published in newspapers, considered his behaviour as admirable. However, a writer then published an article in the *Army and Navy Gazette*, in which publicly and firmly supported Bennet's ideas, stating that a soldier, especially a high-ranked one, was not permitted to decide whether choosing to keep on or discontinue fighting, addressing a critics to Sassoon himself and to the military authorities for judging him ill.⁷⁸

Because of his critics towards the Government, the Under-Secretary for War informed the House of Commons of Sassoon being diagnosed with nervous breakdown, further highlighting the urgent need for medical care at Craiglockhart. Though, he recognized that he wasn't suffering from post-traumatic stress disorders, as according to him, none suffering from this disease could protest with such bravery, which could have potentially led him to be court-martialed.⁷⁹ However, Robert Graves intervened on his behalf and stated that the protest was a result of his mental instability and that he needed a treatment.⁸⁰

By early January 1918, Sassoon had recovered from shell-shock and returned to active duty, but in May 1918 he was shot in the head, event that caused him to be

75 S. Sassoon, *Siegfried's Journey, 1916-1920*, White Lion Publishers, London; New York, 1973, p. 56.

76 *Idem*, p. 52.

77 *Idem*, p. 53.

78 *Idem*, p. 56.

79 *Ibid.*

80 J. S. Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

considered unfit to fight. Once the war ended, Sassoon became a convert to Catholicism- and kept writing until his death in 1967.⁸¹

3.2 Sassoon's Evolution: From Georgian Realism to War Realities

The previous chapter showed how Wilfred Owen was influenced by the Georgian poetry as far as religion is concerned, while in this chapter I will give a deeper analysis on the main stylistic themes that characterized this 20th century's literary movement.

“The judgment that Siegfried Sassoon's pre-war poetry is pale, conventional, cloyingly romantic, and weakly derivative - in short, that it epitomizes what is today slightly called ‘Georgian’ verse - has become a critical commonplace”⁸².

The Georgian movement sets his origins in the second decade of 1900 and the name refers to literary works produced during the reign of King George V. Additionally it may be used to refer to the contributors of Edward Marsh's *Georgian Poetry*,⁸³ a collection of five volumes published from 1912 to 1922, whose aim, according to Marsh, was to give a new beauty and strength to English poetry, marking a new era of the Georgian period.⁸⁴ Georgian writers can be divided into three groups: proto-Georgians such as Harold Monro; war poets such as Sassoon; neo-Georgians such as John Freeman.⁸⁵ Among them, the deceptive figure of Marsh is fundamental to understand the main features of Georgian poetry, as he deeply embedded the essence of his intellectual and emotional commitment into it.

However, Marsh was considered as a “pompous, mindless conservative and as a prim aesthete, a monocled dandy who failed pathetically to mark the vital artistic,

81 H. Bloom, *Poets of World War I: Rupert Brooke & Siegfried Sassoon*, edited by Harold Bloom, Chelsea House Publishers, Philadelphia, 2003, p. 45.

82 L. H. Moore, *Siegfried Sassoon and Georgian Realism*, *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 14, no. 4, 1969, pp. 199–209, p. 199.

83 S. Myron, *The Georgian Poetic*, *The Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, vol. 2, 1969, pp. 121–135, p. 121.

84 The idea is presented in the prefatory note to Sir Edward Howard Marsh, *Georgian Poetry, 1911-1912*, The Poetry Bookshop, London, 1912.

85 M. Giovanelli, *The Language of Siegfried Sassoon*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, Switzerland, 2022, p. 51.

philosophical, and social currents of his own time”⁸⁶. Marsh's distinctive thought patterns were firmly established during his time at Cambridge, when he met and befriended Bertrand Russell and George Edward Moore, who were equally enthusiastic about seeking the truth. Marsh's taste in literature, at least during that period, appeared to be characterized by a lack of concern for prudence, propriety, and mindless adherence to tradition, inclined towards literary works written by artists who were devoted to truth and their craft, even if it meant defying public expectations. These inclinations became more pronounced as a result of Marsh's close association with the early philosophical ideas of Russell and Moore.⁸⁷

Russell and Moore had a profound impact on Marsh, though, they had forsaken the quest for ambitious philosophical unifications and, instead, embraced meticulous examinations of tightly defined aspects of human experience and perception. They believed in multiple truths, which made them doubtful of any form of philosophical or religious singularity. Thus, they had agnostic views on religion, which means that they neither affirm nor deny the existence of God, as they believe that such knowledge is beyond the scope of human understanding or that there is insufficient evidence to make a definitive claim. Therefore, agnosticism is characterized by a form of skepticism that challenges people's ability to have certain knowledge about complex metaphysical and philosophical issues.⁸⁸

Georgian poets “shared [...] a distaste for the public manner - the empty rhetoric of much late Victorian ‘improving’ poetry”⁸⁹, which reflects in the idea according to which drama had to be restored to poetry.⁹⁰ Moreover, refusing the Victorian tradition meant being sincere, vital and truthful, getting rid of the old conventions and confining poetic traditions, openly describing emotions without falsehood. In *The Georgian Revolt*, Ross then argues that:

Poetic realism, or truth to life, was the one feature which distinguished Georgian Poetry I and II from other contemporary anthologies and which gave the Georgians their most

86 S. Myron, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

87 *Idem*, p. 123.

88 *Idem*, pp. 123-127.

89 *Idem*, p. 126.

90 R. H. Ross, *The Georgian Revolt, 1920-1922. Rise and Fall of a Poetic Ideal*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, 1965, p. 121.

nearly unique hallmark. As it was exemplified in Georgian Poetry I and II, realism connoted two qualities, the first a state of mind in the poets themselves. the second a technique of writing verse. As a state of mind among the Georgian poets, realism came to mean primarily anti-sentimentalism. As a technique of verse writing it came to mean the inclusion in poetry of details, however nasty, which presumably possessed truth to reality as it was perceived by the five senses.⁹¹

This observation shows how Georgian poetry can be defined as a ‘static lyric’, in which ideas remain stagnant and emotions do not undergo any expansion or growth.⁹² Hence, it can be said that realism is connected to the representation of beauty and can also express an artistic aim to address the less appealing aspects of life in a sincere manner, trying to acknowledge the existence of a tangible external reality that didn't depend on their personal perception of it.⁹³

In Georgian poetry the concept of experience was one of its best distinctive aspects, as it consisted of a profound exploration of the human condition, describing the simplicity and complexity of life recognizing that poetry was not just an art form, but also a way to share and immortalize the collective human experience. Concluding, I must underline that according to Marsh and the Georgian poets, realism requires more than just the simple documentation of experiences, and this results in the Georgians’ interest in nature, the cyclical patterns of the seasons, matters of love, birth and death and the mysteries of individuality.⁹⁴

Having said that, Sassoon’s pre-war poetry embodies the tendencies of the Georgian poetry, having been profoundly influenced by Edward Marsh, even though with the outbreak of WWI, his poetry became the reflection of war and its brutalities, described by a soldier’s critical viewpoint – Sassoon himself. I must underline that Edward Marsh introduced him to Rupert Brooke, another great Georgian poet, from whom Sassoon was deeply influenced. In fact, the first war poems imitated Brooke’s patriotic verses in “The Soldier”.⁹⁵

91 *Idem*, p. 125.

92 A. Matalon, *Difference at War: Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg, U. Z. Grinberg, and Poetry of the First World War*, *Shofar*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2002, pp. 25–43, p. 28.

93 S. Simon, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

94 *Idem*, p. 132.

95 S. Sternlicht, *Siegfried Sassoon*, New York: Twayne Publishers; Toronto: Maxwell Macmillan Canada; New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1993, p. 6.

In *The Weald of Youth*, Sassoon reflects on his pre-war poetry, stating “the two things about which I wrote with most fullness of feeling were music and the early morning”⁹⁶, as for him “music was the handmaide of the muse, and all roads led toward sunrise”⁹⁷. Indeed, poems such as “Morning Express”⁹⁸, “A Thought” and “After Dusk”, reveal Sassoon’s experimentation of Georgian realism and its idealistic style, with particular attention to picturesque landscapes and sounds.⁹⁹ For instance, he creates a relationship between sounds and sight in “Morning Express”: “Along the wind-swept platform, pinched and white, the travellers stand in pools of wintry light [...] The train steams in, volleying resplendent clouds, of sun-blown vapour”¹⁰⁰. Moreover, in 1917, Virginia Woolf, within a review of Sassoon's verses, discerned how this poem predicted war poetry, calling it "a solid and in its way beautiful catalogue of facts" that indicated an early vein of realism which the war opened up”¹⁰¹, as it displayed a particular attention to detail without using the inflated language I have already talked about in Chapter 1, so, using a simple and understandable language.

The reason why I decided to provide a brief introduction to this poem is because, according to L. Hugh Moore in *Siegfried Sassoon and Georgian Realism*, it vividly illustrates the ongoing struggle within Sassoon's poems, contrasting romantic fantasies with an authentic representation of reality. Sassoon had developed his war poetry even before he witnessed first-hand the horrors of WWI,¹⁰² in fact, the romantic verse “volleying resplendent clouds, of sun-blown vapour”¹⁰³ contrasts with the more realistic:

Boys, indolent eyed, from baskets leaning back,
Question each face; a man with a hammer steals
Stooping from coach to coach; with clang and clack
Touches and tests, and listens to the wheels.¹⁰⁴

96 S. Sassoon, *The Weald of Youth*, The Right Book Club, London, 1943, pp. 34-35.

97 *Idem*, p. 35.

98 L. H. Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 204.

99 M. Giovanelli, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

100 S. Sassoon, *Collected Poems*, The Viking Press, New York, 1949, p. 44-45. Lines 1-2, 5-6.

101 L. H. Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 204.

102 *Idem*, p. 205.

103 S. Sassoon, *op. cit.*, p. 44. Lines 5-6.

104 *Idem*, p. 45.

Sassoon's initial approach to war poetry, unexpectedly, involved a retreat from the conventions of Georgian realism. This retreat served a dual purpose: he used his verses as a means to either distance himself from the harsh realities of the war, seeking solace in a more idyllic world, or as a way to obscure his genuine doubts behind the use of an elevated and refined language. Moreover, in earlier works such as “The Daffodil Murderer” and “The Old Huntsman”, Sassoon tried to describe the world as he perceived it, in contrast with the terrible description of the grim reality surrounding him and his comrades while in trenches, although he focused on the visually appealing aspects of war prioritizing aesthetics over honesty. By 1916, due to his experiences in the conflict, he underwent a transformation, rejecting the foundational principles of Georgian realism and depicting the truth of war in a honest manner.¹⁰⁵ However, I feel the duty to underline that even after the loss of his brother in Gallipoli, the tone of the poetry remained strongly pro-war, further undergoing a drastic change after witnessing the Battle of the Somme.¹⁰⁶

Your lot is with the ghosts of soldiers dead,
And I am in the field where men must fight.
But in the gloom I see your laureird head
And through your victory
I shall win the light.¹⁰⁷

“Sassoon was the first English poet to rebel with vigor and passion against the older tradition of war poetry, and he was one of the very few poets who expressed this mood continually and violently while the war was still in progress”¹⁰⁸. The rebellion is expressed in the *Declaration*, written in 1917 and sent to several leading public figures such as Thomas Hardy, Arnold Bennett, Edward Carpenter, Edward Marsh and H.G Wells. In my opinion, the text shows how Sassoon managed to get rid of the romantic idealization of war to describe the falseness of its glorification, trying to use a didactic tone. He not only describes his rebellion as a result of the senselessness of war and the ongoing loss of lives, but also tries to shed light on the real conditions during wartime

105 L. H. Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

106 A. Matalon, *op. cit.*, p 30.

107 S. Sassoon, *Selected Poems*, Faber and Faber, London, 1968, p. 14.

108 D. Daiches, *Poetry in the First World War*, *Poetry*, vol. 56, no. 6, 1940, pp. 323–332, pp. 324-325.

referring to the people at home. Hence, Sassoon employs rhetorical devices such as irony and sarcasm to challenge the conventional narrative of heroism and patriotism, trying to enlighten the audience about the horrors of battle and emotional toll of the soldiers. I will now provide the full text:

I am making this statement as an act of wilful defiance of military authority, because I believe the war is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it. I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers. I believe that this war, which I entered as a war of defence and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and conquest. I believe that the purposes for which I and my fellow soldiers entered upon this war should have been so clearly stated as to have made it impossible to change them, and that, had this been done, the objects which actuated us would now be attainable by negotiation.

I have seen and endured the suffering of the troops, and I can no longer be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil and unjust. I am not protesting against the conduct of the war, but against the political errors and insincerities for which the fighting men are being sacrificed. On behalf of those who are suffering now I make this protest against the deception which is being practised on them; also I believe that I may help to destroy the callous complacency with which the majority of those at home regard the continuance of agonies which they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realize.¹⁰⁹

As I stated in the historical contextualisation of this chapter, Sassoon was not anti-war at the beginning, however, his anti-nationalistic belief developed after witnessing the horrors he was not aware of before joining the war, further providing satirical anti-war tracts to his poetry. It has to be said that the most important war poems of *The Old Huntsman and Other Poems* and *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*, represent two different aspects of Sasson's life in trenches, as *The Old Huntsman and Other Poems* embodies his evolving response throughout the span of a single year, from January 1916 to January 1917, while *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* was written during profound personal crisis, which resulted in his protest against the war.¹¹⁰

109 S. Sassoon, *Diaries, 1915-1918*, edited by Rupert Hart-Davis, Faber and Faber, London, 1983, pp. 173-174.

110 J. H. Johnston, *English Poetry of the First World War; A Study in the Evolution of Lyric and Narrative Form*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1964, p. 96.

In the *Declaration*, he outlines what he is protesting against, that is the suffering of the soldiers in trenches with a direct critique against people at home, implying that they are ignorant as “they have not sufficient imagination to realize”¹¹¹, meaning that the patriotic verses written in other poets’ poems, created a distorted view of reality in the trenches. Also, he refers to them describing their “callous complacency”, as they were surrounded by fake descriptions of war, so, in my view, Sassoon felt empathy for their ignorance and considered them as not being at fault. However, there is also an indirect critique to the Government, to which he refers with “those who have the power to end it”¹¹², criticizing “the political errors and insincerities for which the fighting men are being sacrificed”¹¹³.

A parallelism can be created, as the themes in the *Declaration* are quite analogous to those in Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum Est”: Owen denounces the famous Latin phrase that states that “it is sweet and meet to die for one's country”¹¹⁴, trying to dismantle the romanticized idea of war and emphasizing the inhumanity of the war experience; instead, Sassoon openly expresses his refusal to continue fighting in what he considers an unjust and futile war, addressing a direct critique towards those who promote the conflict and towards the hypocrisy of war rhetoric. Concluding, I would like to focus on the *Declaration* as far as the writing techniques are concerned, as they reflect Sassoon's internal struggle and the conflict between his duty as a soldier and his moral objections to the war, underlined by the use of the first person ‘I believe’ that is repeated several times in the text, showing the clarity and authenticity of his convictions and underscoring the subjective nature of his stance.

3.3 The Core of Sassoon’s Poetry: Analysis of His Collections of Poems

The British war poetry achieved its greatest prominence from 1914 to 1918, with many poems that can be divided into two groups: the first group belongs to patriotic works, in which authors such as Rupert Brooke, Charles Sorley and the early-Sassoon provided an

111 S. Sassoon, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

112 *Idem*, p. 173.

113 *Idem*, p. 174.

114 W. Owen, *Collected Letters, cit.*, pp. 499-500.

idealized and romanticized description of war; the second one, instead, belongs to the anti-war poetry, in which the main themes were the sufferings of men and the disillusionment¹¹⁵ caused by the presence, quoting again Paul Fussell, of an “elevated rhetoric in which so much that was written about the war was couched”¹¹⁶.

Sassoon published four collections of war poems: *The Old Huntsman and Other Poems* (1917), which was made up of 72 poems, *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*(1918) with 39 poems, *Picture-Show* (1919) with 34 poems and *The War Poems of Siegfried Sassoon* (1919) with 64 poems, of which three were new, while the remaining ones were from the previous three collections.¹¹⁷ In the four poems, lies the essence of Sassoon’s poetry.

The Old Huntsman and Other Poems was written in 1915 and finally published in three different editions: the first one in May 1917, the second one in August of the same year and the third one in May 1918. The collection was dedicated to Thomas Hardy as made explicit by Sassoon himself in the introductory page.¹¹⁸ This collection especially represents the transformation from the conventional idealism to the realism-based poems which made an impact both on readers and on soldiers because of their authenticity, which had a didactic tone.¹¹⁹ It also showcases Sassoon's evolving perspective on the war: initially, he expresses patriotic sentiments, but as the conflict progresses, his poems become more critical and anti-establishment. This transformation is emblematic of the broader disillusionment experienced by many soldiers during World War I. Moreover, it was well received by some critics, but it also sparked controversy due to its clear opposition to the war. As I have already made noticeable while analyzing the *Declaration*, Sassoon’s intent was “to use poetry as a means of forcibly impressing on the civilian world some notion of the realities in front-line life”¹²⁰. In the title poem, he maintained the style and themes associated with Georgian realism without any trace of satire, which implies that Sassoon's current writing is more

115 S. Sternlicht, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

116 T. Bogacz, *op. cit.*, p. 644.

117 S. Sternlicht, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

118 The edition I am referring to was published in 1918 by E.P. Dutton & Company. The poems that I will analyze belong to this edition.

119 B. Bergonzi, *Heroes' Twilight: A Study of the Literature of the Great War*, Macmillan, London, 1980, p. 97.

120 *Ibid.*

straightforward, without the use of humor or irony to criticize.¹²¹ According to Sanford Sternlicht, the poem “indicates Sassoon’s growing concern and compassion for less fortunate human beings. Now he is genuinely attempting to get inside a character and portray him with sympathy and understanding”¹²².

Sassoon’s second collection, *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*, was written during his treatment at Craiglockhart, period in which his life was characterized by a profound and intense anti-war sentiment. This implies that the writings included in the collection reflect Sassoon's strong opposition to war, and they serve as a poignant expression of his beliefs and convictions against armed conflicts. In his analysis, Marcello Giovanelli argues that the words ‘kill’, ‘die’ and ‘death’ are used many times throughout the poems “in relation to how blame is assigned”¹²³. The poems in this collection shocked the public because Sassoon provided a realistic portrayal of war with an unromanticized view. The preface to the poem is noteworthy, as it contains a quotation from Henri Barbusse’s *Le Feu*, a novel written during WWI in which the author’s anti-war sentiments are embedded. Sassoon declared in *Sherston’s Progress* that he had read the English version of the book while he was at Craiglockhart.¹²⁴ Indeed, as I have mentioned in the second chapter, Owen for instance was encouraged to keep in touch with nature by using poetry, so, despite the spectral environment that characterized the psychiatric hospital, there was room for literature and knowledge too. I will now provide both versions, though I must underline that Sassoon quoted the French one in the preface to *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*. The importance of the quotation lies in its providing insight into the thematic essence of the poems within this collection. It is crucial to note that these poems differ from those in the previous collection, particularly in their depiction of the emotional intensities inherent in combat scenarios.¹²⁵

121 L. H. Moore, *op. cit.*, p. 204.

122 S. Sternlicht, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

123 M. Giovanelli, *The Language of Siegfried Sassoon*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, Switzerland, 2022, p. 124.

124 J. H. Johnston, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

125 *Idem*, p. 96.

<p>In their troubled truce of the morning, these men whom fatigue had tormented, whom rain had scourged, whom night-long lightning had convulsed, these survivors of volcanoes and flood began not only to see dimly how war, as hideous morally as physically, outrages common sense, debases noble ideas and dictates all kind of crime, but they remembered how it had enlarged in them and about them every evil instinct save none, mischief developed into lustful cruelty, selfishness into ferocity, the hunger for enjoyment into a mania.¹²⁶</p>	<p>Dans la trêve désolée de cette matinée, ces hommes qui avaient été tenaillés par la fatigue, fouettés par la pluie, bouleversés par toute une nuit de tonnerre, ces rescapés des volcans et de l'inondation entrevoyaient à quel point la guerre, aussi hideuse au moral qu'au physique, non seulement viole le bon sens, avilit les grandes idées, commande tous les crimes —mais ils se rappelaient combien elle avait développé en eux et autour d'eux tous les mauvais instincts sans en excepter un seul; la méchanceté jusqu'au sadisme, l'égoïsme jusqu'à la férocité, le besoin de jouir jusqu'à la folie.¹²⁷</p>
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It is fundamental to underline the importance of trauma in Sassoon's poetry. Especially in *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*, the trauma experienced by others undergoes a transformation through the perspective of the narrator and is translated into written expression. As a result, the narrator reshapes and interprets the traumatic experiences of others trying to give meaning to the trauma, capturing it in the written narrative. For instance, in *Sherston's Progress* Sassoon reflects on the spooky corridors and haunted environment at Craiglockhart by night:¹²⁸

But by night they lost control and the hospital became sepulchral and oppressive with saturations of war experience. One lay awake and listened to feet padding across passages which smelt of stale cigarette smoke; for the nurses couldn't prevent insomnia-ridden officers from smoking half the night in their bedrooms, though the locks had been removed from all the doors. One became conscious that the place was full of men

126 H. Barbusse, *Under Fire*. Translated by Fitzwater Wray, E.P. Dutton & Co, New York, 1917, pp. 343-344.

127 J. H. Johnston, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

128 M. Giovanelli, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

whose slumbers were morbid and terrifying – men muttering uneasily or suddenly crying out in their sleep.¹²⁹

Trauma and sense of responsibility are present in Sassoon's "Sick Leave", originally entitled "Death's Brotherhood", seen as "a psychological reconciliation in which Sassoon aims to bridge the psychological distance he perceived between himself and his memories of his fallen conscripts"¹³⁰.

When I'm asleep, dreaming and lulled and warm,
They come, the homeless ones, the noiseless dead.
While the dim charging breakers of the storm
Bellow and drone and rumble overhead,
Out of the gloom they gather about my bed.
 They whisper to my heart; their thoughts are mine.
 "Why are you here with all your watches ended?
 From Ypres to Frise we sought you in the line."
In bitter safety I awake, unfriended;
And while the dawn begins with slashing rain
I think of the Battalion in the mud.
"When are you going out to them again?
Are they not still your brothers through our blood?"¹³¹

The first line introduces Sassoon apparently sleeping surrounded by a pleasant environment described by the terms 'lulled' and 'warm', while in line 2 there is a focus on the images of the 'homeless' and 'noiseless dead', consisting of his fallen comrades who died in trenches during the battles of Ypres in Belgium, and Frise in France, as made clear in line 8. I believe that this poem does not mainly represent Sassoon's ideas towards war, but focuses more on the sense of trauma after witnessing the death of soldiers considered as a silent one, meaning that the soldiers' sacrifice will be made vain by the indifference of the authorities - the Governments, the Church and people at home. Furthermore, it focuses on the sense of personal responsibility for being unable to bring the fellow soldiers back to life, creating a bond between the ones like him who are still alive and the ones who perished and lost their lives in conflict. There are linguistic elements throughout the text such as 'their thoughts are mine' in line 6 and 'brothers

129 S. Sassoon, *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston*, Faber and Faber, London, 1972, p. 556.

130 M. Giovanelli, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

131 S. Sassoon, *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*, E.P. Dutton, & Co, New York, 1918, p. 43.

through your blood' in line 13, that seem to create a connection, indeed, a brotherhood, between life and death.

The struggle to rejoin his men in France is a battle waged within and against his mind; the speaker can interpret safety and solitude only as markers of his own abandonment of responsibility [...] Through the blood of the dead the speaker remains connected in the "blood" of the brotherhood to the living men, and through the blood of the dead he will become capable of returning in hopes of preventing further loss of shedding blood of his own.¹³²

"The General" is a poem written in 1917 and published in *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*, in which a direct critique towards the incompetence and indifference of military leadership is addressed.

"GOOD-MORNING; good-morning!" the General said
When we met him last week on our way to the line.
Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of 'em dead,
And we're cursing his staff for incompetent swine.
"He's a cheery old card," grunted Harry to Jack
As they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack.
But he did for them both by his plan of attack.¹³³

The poem begins with "an unnamed speaker who adopts a knowledgeable and privileged perspective on the events that are narrated"¹³⁴ describing a meeting with a general who at first greeted the soldiers with a 'Good-morning', but without considering that the soldiers he smiled at were mostly dead, followed by a critique towards him and the military leadership in line 4 for their incompetence. The tone of the poem is ironic:¹³⁵ the title itself at first sight may lead the reader to think that the figure of the general implies great strategic and leadership skills, however, Sassoon depicts him as a man who sends soldiers to his deaths without a true understanding of the brutal conditions they have to face in trenches. The final line of the poem underwent a change in structure, as in the first draft of the poem, instead of 'did for', Sassoon wrote 'murdered', further changing it into, in fact, 'did for', on Edward Marsh's advice since

132 D. Hipp, *The Poetry of Shellshock: Wartime Trauma and Healing in Wilfred Owen, Ivor Gurney and Siegfried Sassoon*, Macfarland and Company, Jefferson N.C., 2005, pp. 166-167.

133 S. Sassoon, *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*, cit., p. 26.

134 M. Giovanelli, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

135 S. Sternlicht, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

he considered the verb too direct in comparison with ‘murdered’, which suggested deliberateness and was less definitive in assigning direct responsibility to the General.¹³⁶

As anticipated in Chapter 1, during WWI the Governments adopted censorship in order to prevent dissent and maintain the war effort. However,

“The General” - which violated the rule against criticism of the conduct of the war - was partially responsible for this difficulty with the censor. These aggressive satires are indeed essentially negative and destructive. They strike out at specific targets, but in so doing indict the whole national military effort without taking any stand that would honor the positives implicit in that effort.¹³⁷

To sum up, the general’s decisions contribute to the soldiers' sense of betrayal and disillusionment, since he is described as detached from reality and unable to understand will lead to unnecessary casualties. Sassoon provides a critical poem written with a colloquial register, in which “The use of ‘old card’, the speaker’s clipping of “em’, and lexical items associated with war such as ‘the line’, ‘cursing’, ‘slogged’, and ‘rifle and pack’ all echo the language of the working-class soldier and specifically the lexicon of the trenches”¹³⁸. As I have already analyzed, Sassoon’s literature aims to shed light on the realities of war with a didactic tone. Because of this, I think that the writer addresses indirectly to the readers, trying to make them reflect on the repercussions of misguided decisions made by those in power, emphasizing the need for conscientious and compassionate leadership during the war.

Concluding the analysis, I have to underline Sassoon’s dissatisfaction with the literary techniques he had employed in the first two collections,¹³⁹ recognizing his delayed acknowledgment of Owen's achievements and revealing an implicit revaluation of his own satirical and realistic approaches, highlighting the perceived inadequacy of these methods in expressing the deeper dimensions of the war.¹⁴⁰

Sassoon’s collection, *Picture-Show*, was published in Britain in 1919 and in America in 1920. It was dedicated to John Masefield and originally contained 41 poems, of which 12 were war poems, with death, sufferings and pain as main themes;

136 M. Giovanelli, *op. cit.*, pp. 123-124.

137 J. H. Johnston, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

138 M. Giovanelli, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

139 *The Old Huntsman and Other Poems* and *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*.

140 J. H. Johnston, *op. cit.*, pp. 111-112.

thus, they have emotional conflict as the main theme. The second edition contained the original 41 poems, with the addition of other seven, including “In an Underground Dressing Station”, which was the first poem written in this collection and dated 1917, with the presentation of a deadly wounded soldier in pain for being shot to the leg by the enemy, begging for help to the doctor in front of him.¹⁴¹ The collection can be considered as a transitional work, as Sassoon began to change the focus of his poetry: originally centered on the specific details of war, he is now moving towards addressing more general themes related to peace.¹⁴² In doing so, since the poems straddled the armistice, he had to react to demobilization attempting to revert to his prewar lifestyle and writing habits, whose process is described in the collection. It could be said that Sassoon’s aim was not describing war and its atrocities anymore, instead, he wanted to treat the theme of war so that future generations will not forget the war.¹⁴³ In “Aftermath”, written in March 1919, a description of how the memory of the war persisted in Sassoon’s troubled consciousness is presented.¹⁴⁴

Have you forgotten yet?...
For the world's events have rumbled on since those gagged days,
Like traffic checked while at the crossing of city-ways:
And the haunted gap in your mind has filled with thoughts that flow
Like clouds in the lit heaven of life; and you're a man reprieved to go,
Taking your peaceful share of Time, with joy to spare.
But the past is just the same--and War's a bloody game...
Have you forgotten yet?...
Look down, and swear by the slain of the War that you'll never forget.¹⁴⁵

Concluding, “Everyone Sang” is Sassoon’s last war poem in the collection and consists of “a lyrical, soldier’s celebration of the arrival of peace, replete with hope and joy”¹⁴⁶. It became one of the most popular Sassoon’s poems and one of the most quoted among the whole collection of Sassoonish literary works. It was became so famous that it was read during a Peace Pledge Union (PPU) in 1935 since the specter of another war

141 S. Sternlicht, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

142 *Ibid.*

143 J. S. Roberts, *op.cit.*, p. 51.

144 S. Sternlicht, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

145 This is a fragment of Sassoon's poem *Aftermath*, in *Picture-Show*, E.P. Dutton & Company, New York, 1920, p. 47.

146 S. Sternlicht, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

loomed, contributing to the advancement of the pacifist movement.¹⁴⁷ As observed by Sternlicht Sanford in his conclusion of his analysis on Sassoon's poems, in *Picture Show* Sassoon rises from the bloodbath of battle to find some distraction and healing in the comforts of peace and the pleasures of life, no longer charged with terror and hate, while he commences the exorcism of the soldier-ghosts. *Picture Show* is his passport to aftermath.¹⁴⁸

I would like now to conclude my analysis focused on Sassoon's collections with one of the most important collections of war poetry written during WWI, *The War Poems of Siegfried Sassoon*. There is not much to say about this collection, since it collects all poems but one appeared in *The Old Huntsman and Other Poems, Counter-Attack and Other Poems* and *Picture Show*. Moreover, the collection was arranged and introduced by Rupert Hart-Davis in 1983.¹⁴⁹ The only poem which was not included in the previous ones is "Return of the Heroes": written in October 1919, it consists of a satiric monologue in which a description of a young lady watching a parade of soldiers is provided. She is described as proud of the soldiers walking, but she is unaware of all the horrors they had to face while in trenches, since she is thinking that the soldiers, or rather, Heroes, are 'sad to know they can't win any more'.¹⁵⁰

Sassoon's satire is made noticeable in the lady's ignorance, as she is indirectly described as "scatterbrained" and "shallow"¹⁵¹: how can she imagine that soldiers, after witnessing their comrades' deaths and after facing illnesses and stressful situations, could be happy for not winning against the enemy troops again? Instead, I would say that the Armistice of November 1918 signed the true and most important victory for humanity. The men who were marching in front of the lady faced so many atrocities, and it is almost impossible to imagine what hiding in trenches waiting for the enemy to expose himself, while being ready to pull the trigger and put an end to an innocent life really means.

147 M. Giovanelli, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

148 S. Sternlicht, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

149 *Ibid.*

150 S. Sassoon, *The War Poems of Siegfried Sassoon*. Edited by Rupert Hart-Davis, Faber and Faber, London, 1983, p. 146.

151 S. Sternlicht, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

I would like to conclude this chapter with a reflection on Sassoon's poetry, since his remarkable ability to balance protest and patriotism remains an example of how art can be a powerful tool to capture the complexity of the human experience in times of conflict. His protest was never a mere irrational rejection of war but rather an articulate critique of a conflict that undermined the fundamental values he fought for; simultaneously, his deep connection to the homeland emerged through nostalgia, the idealization of the past and the immortalization of those who sacrificed their lives for the cause.

Conclusions

In this dissertation, I have discussed the profound impact of War Poets on shaping our perception of war and the human condition. The psychological consequences of the First World War deeply reverberated in literature, influencing a generation of writers who confronted the trauma and disillusionment that characterized the war. The literary works from this period often serve as intense reflections on the psychological scars left by the war, offering insights into the complexities of human experience in the aftermath of unprecedented destruction.

Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, upon which my thesis mainly focuses, witnessed first-hand the brutalities of war and managed to describe them in an unconventional way, considering the norms of their time. They aimed to shed light on the harsh realities surrounding the trenches. Although their poetry might be mistakenly perceived as a 'lament' because of the mournful nature of their verses, in my opinion, they act as testimonies which prompt readers to reevaluate preconceived notions about war and recognize its true impact on the lives of individuals.

I also hope to have shed light on the different attitudes towards war and how they changed during its years, since at the outbreak of the conflict in 1914, there was a surge of enthusiasm and patriotism across British society, which resulted in a wave of volunteers signing up for military service. As the war progressed, a growing anti-war sentiment emerged, led in part by intellectuals which through their poetry expressed a vehement opposition to the war's senseless brutality.

In conclusion, Owen's and Sassoon's poetry serves as a bridge between the past and the present, connecting us to the human stories that unfolded amid the chaos of war. Their purpose was not to describe war mainly, but to allow their words to resonate in the minds of the future generations. For instance, Owen's "Anthem for Doomed Youth" and Sassoon's "Aftermath" echo in our collective consciousness, urging us never to forget the lost generation and the profound impact of global conflict, since through remembrance and reflection, we honor the fallen soldiers and develop a commitment to peace.

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