

## Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen & World War I

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I

The First World War (1914-1918) was one of the most atrocious events in human history in which millions of people were killed and injured. Young men were widely recruited through a very strong persuasive propaganda, which portrayed the war as an opportunity for young men to defend their country and raise its banner high in the battlefields, prove their bravery and heroism, enjoy the adventure of action and taste the delight of battles. Military parades were usually held in the streets of towns where crowds, including young beautiful girls, stood along, hailing the new recruits who felt high pride in their uniform amidst the cheering applause of the happy audience. Newspapers and magazines used to publish so many stories of heroism about brave soldiers who fought the enemy single-handed and achieved great victories with photographs of some posing soldiers. Posters were hung everywhere in the towns and cities encouraging young men to join the war, and many poets at home wrote on the war, its just cause and the bravery of fighters. But once these men arrived at the battlefields and lived in the trenches that they opened their eyes to the truth of war and its sufferings and miseries. Of these disillusioned men were Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen.

Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967) was a son of wealthy family; his father was a banker of a Jewish Baghdadi origin with some influential relations in the world of English politics and business. His mother was of an Anglo-Catholic family. Like many young men of his class, Sassoon, before the First World War, spent his time enjoying the leisure life of sports and dilettante literary activities in the English countryside such as reading, writing amateurish poetry, fox hunting, horse-riding, cricket and some other pastimes. With the eruption of the First World War, he decided to volunteer for patriotic reasons under the influence of the propaganda accompanying the war. He enlisted early but an accident while riding kept him away from action until 1915, when he got some military training and was sent to France to serve as an infantry officer at the western front. In spite of some reports about his bravery for which he got a military medal, he was soon shocked by the horrors of the war and disillusioned of its nobility and justice. Hence, while he was at home recuperating from some injuries, he sent a letter of protest to his captain, declaring his refusal to fight any more because he no longer believed in the just cause of the war. He was considered mentally affected, hence he was sent to Craiglockhart psychiatric hospital in Scotland for the treatment of shell-shocked soldiers, where he met some other young poets who were suffering from the same shock, including Wilfred Owen.

Wilfred Owen (1893-1918) did not enjoy the leisure life of Sassoon; he came from a humbler Christian family “who was short of money all the time”,<sup>1</sup> and he himself was a devout Christian who worked for some time as an assistant to the vicar of Dunsden, near Reading, 1911-1913, teaching Bible classes and leading prayer meetings. When the First World War broke out, he was away in France working as a private language tutor. Thus, he felt completely disconnected from the war, but gradually he was strongly affected by the war news which he used to read in the newspapers sent to him by his mother; hence, he started to feel guilty of his carelessness and finally he returned to England to volunteer in October 1915. After enjoying for a while the impression he made on the people while walking about in his uniform, he was sent to France on the last day of 1916, showing boyish high spirits at being a soldier, and from there he was carried by a cattle-wagon to the front lines. Soon he experienced the great horrors of war, and although he was awarded a medal of bravery, he was mentally shocked at the human losses and great sufferings of soldiers in the trenches. He was declared unfit for service and sent to Craiglockhart

psychiatric hospital for treatment, where he met Sassoon, who became a close friend and helped him develop his poetic talent. After recovery, he was sent back to the front lines to be killed one week before the armistice.

Both Sassoon and Owen turned their war experiences into poems that remain, with the poems of a few other young soldier poets, a true chronicle of the sufferings and miseries of the young soldiers who were obliged to fight in a savage war which seemed never to end. Their poems, in spite of all differences in style, technique, language, and approach, expose the inhuman effects of war on the soldiers; the dehumanization of soldiers by their superiors, who showed clear nonchalance to the fate and suffering of those soldiers; the futility and hopelessness of their trench life, and the loss of their youth and life in the war; hence these poems are replete with humanistic feelings toward young soldiers in the trenches. These poems have become a true historical document of the daily life of soldiers at the front lines during the First World War, satirizing and condemning the carelessness of the politicians at home who prolonged the war to achieve personal glories for themselves without any regard to the miserable conditions of soldiers and the high casualties among them.

## II

Siegfried Sassoon wrote some poems before joining the war and experiencing its horrors, but the tone, theme and nature of poems written after going through the burning fires of war were completely different. The dominant quality of these new poems is anger.<sup>1</sup> They are raging anti-war poems, full of anger at all those who caused the war or encouraged it, whether the politicians at home, the general public, including the clergymen and especially the young girls, who applauded and cheered the battles without knowing the sufferings of soldiers at the battlefields, or even those military generals who led to high casualties because of their bad planning. Hence these poems become an outcry that sprang from the tortured hearts of soldiers who suffered the agonies of savage trench fighting and furious combats which they were not psychologically well-prepared for, including poisonous gas (mustard) attacks. In their realistic diction, savage imagery, conversational tone, ironic turns, and day to day register of young soldiers' life at the battlefields, these poems are an authentic account of Sassoon's experience at the First World War.

One of the important subjects Sassoon usually presents is the basic truth about the daily life of the soldiers in the trenches with all its ugly details, showing their feelings and thoughts, especially at times of bombardments or firings. Unlike those civilian poets who glorify the heroism of soldiers at such times, Sassoon refuses to falsify the truth by exaggerating the patriotism of soldiers or their enthusiasm for fighting and laying their lives for their country, he rather bares the mere truth by revealing the worry, fear of death, and physical exhaustion of those soldiers. In "Bombardment", for instance, he shows the soldiers' physical weariness and the paralyzing fear that keeps them sleepless for days at the expectation of death. He says:

**Four days the earth was rent and torn  
By bursting steel,  
The houses fell about us;  
Three nights we dared not sleep,  
Sweating, and listening for the imminent crash,  
Which meant our death.<sup>ii</sup>**

Thus, Sassoon tries to convey the true psychological conditions of soldiers at such times of dangers. They do not think of glory or heroism; their thoughts rather revolve around their simple, homely life with all its ordinary daily activities, which looks so precious at such difficult times of fear and misery. In "Dreamers", he says:

**Soldiers are dreamers; when the guns begin  
They think of firelit homes, clean beds, and wives,  
I see them in foul dug-outs, gnawed by rats,  
And in the ruined trenches, lashed with rain,  
Dreaming of things they did with balls and bats,**

**And mocked by hopeless longing to regain  
Bank-holidays, and picture shows, and spats,  
And going to the office in the train. (p. 6)**

The contrast between the “foul dug-out”, “ruined trenches”, the gnawing “rats” and the lashing “rain” on one hand, and the “fire-lit homes”, “clean beds”, “wives”, “bank holidays”, and “picture shows” on the other, highlights the suffering of the young soldiers and the futility of their miserable and dangerous present life in which they try to find a psychological refuge from their fear and misery in remembering the simple pleasures of their previous civilian peaceful life. By emphasizing these realistic details of trench life with the rats and rain, Sassoon evidently tries to arouse sympathy for the young soldiers as much as he indirectly lashes at the idealistic view which portrays an imaginary glorious picture of war. In this poem, as in almost all his poems, “War”, as one critic says, “is far from being the glorious call to duty”.<sup>iii</sup>

This picture of misery, despair, futility, and fear is so recurrent in Sassoon’s poems that it has become a typical characteristic of his presentation of the soldiers’ life in the trenches. In his poem “Attack”, for instance, he describes the soldiers, while moving in columns to climb a hill during an attack, as “faces masked with fear”, desperate and frustrated:

**Lines of grey, muttering faces, masked with fear,  
They leave their trenches, going over the top,  
While time ticks blank and busy on their wrists,  
And hope, with furtive eyes and grappling fists,  
Flounders in mud. O Jesus, make it stop! (p. 2)**

The last sentence is clearly a cry of anguish for an end of the horrible war.

Again, in “Suicide in the Trenches”, Sassoon shows the futility of the soldiers’ life in the trenches which leads many of them to kill themselves. He is angry at the way these young men are taken from their peaceful civilian life to be thrown into a difficult, painful life they are not ready for. The misery of young, innocent men who are unable to bear the difficulty of trench life with its dirt, cold, and shortage of food and drink drives them to commit suicide to escape misery. In this poem, he takes a simple young soldier whose life before the war was so easy and carefree that he enjoyed every moment in it, but after his recruiting, his life is turned upside down to be harsh and depressing. The destruction of his simple and happy life pushes him to put a bullet in his head and end his misery. The simplicity of diction, the shortness of verse line, the lack of artistry, and the rhymed couplets, all are intended to correspond with the simple, short life of the boy:

**I knew a simple soldier boy  
Who grinned at life in empty joy,  
Slept soundly through the lonesome dark,  
And whistled early with the lark.**

**In winter trenches, cowed and glum,  
With crumps and lice and lack of rum,  
He put a bullet through his brain,  
No one spoke of him again. (p. 6)**

Evidently, the directness of language, its concreteness, and lack of high-flown imagery or vehement rhetoric might have been intended to lay bare the ugly truth of the war without ornament. Sassoon shows how the physical torment can intensify the psychological torture and both lead to a very expensive cost, represented by man’s end of his life by his own hands. The last line above painfully reveals the insignificance of the soldier in the trenches; he is immediately forgotten once he dies, as if he were not a human being whose life is valuable and precious. The

hatred of war because it drags the soldier away from his peaceful life to a harsh miserable existence he does not have any experience with can also be seen in his "Before the Battle" in which he says:

**I scorn the growl and rumble of the fight  
That summons me from cool  
Silence of marsh and pool  
And yellow lilies is landed in light. (p. 2)**

Sassoon is always angry with the civilians at home who do not know what war is, yet they are so enthusiastic about it, pushing and encouraging the young soldiers to join it. In the first stanza of his short poem, "They", which is written in two stanzas, he severely attacks a priest who praises the just cause of the war which has enriched the young men and changed them for the better. In the second stanza, the poet says that soldiers have really changed, "for George has lost both his legs; and Bill's stone blind;/ Poor Jim's shot through the lungs and like to die;/ And Bert's gone syphilitic". (p.8) It is obvious that the change has happened not through the enrichment of their experience as the priest has said but rather through the physical disfigurement and distortion of war's injuries that surely highlight the savageness and brutality of war, which the priest seems to be completely ignorant of.

In the same vein, "Suicide in the Trench" satirizes the cheering public who support the war as a result of their ignorance of war atrocities. In it, the poet addresses these civilians with contempt, telling them that they should pray God not to experience the hellish nature of war in which youth and happiness pass away unnoticed. He says:

**You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye  
Who cheer when soldier lads march by  
Sneak home and pray you'll never know  
The hell where youth and laughter go. (p. 6)**

In his "Glory of Women", Sassoon directs his anger at the women who adore the English soldiers as daring heroes who face danger fearlessly while they are ignorant of the horrible truths of the battlefield in which soldiers are seized by bouts of fear that may push them to run away treading on the dead bodies of their comrades. He says, addressing these women:

**You love us when we're heroes, home on leave  
Or wounded in a mentionable place.  
.... You listen with delight,  
By tales of dirt and danger fondly thrilled.  
.....  
You can't believe that British troops 'retire'  
When hell's last horror breaks them, and they run,  
Trampling the terrible corpses-blind with blood. (p. 3)**

Sassoon always draws a sharp line between the world of the civilians and that of the soldiers. In "The Redeemer", the sharp contrast between the two worlds is well-portrayed. He says:

**When peaceful folk in beds lay snug asleep;  
There, with much work to do before the light,  
We lugged our clay-sucked boots as best we might  
Along the trench; sometimes a bullet sang. (p. 7)**

Sassoon's attack is not limited to the insensitive civilians, but also extends to the military institution and its ways of dealing with the soldiers or their parents after death. The soldiers are important only when they are able to fight but once killed, no one cares about them. As to the parents, they are usually consoled or cheated into acceptance by untrue stories about the heroic deaths of their sons. In "The Hero", he presents a dramatic scene in which an

officer tells a mother about the heroic death of her son, but through his mind, we can see how the boy died in panic when a mine exploded and he was torn to pieces with no one to care. He says:

**She half looked up. "We mothers are so proud  
Of our dead soldiers." Then her face was bowed.  
Quietly the Brother Officer went out.  
He'd told the poor old dear some gallant lies  
That she would nourish all her days, no doubt.**

.....  
**He thought how "Jack," cold-footed, useless swine,  
Had panicked down the trench that night the mine  
Went up ... and ... he died,  
Blown to small bits. And no one seemed to care  
Except that lonely woman with white hair. (p. 7)**

It is significant to see the physical reaction of the afflicted mother, whose words of pride contrast sharply with her facial expression. Pride usually makes one raise one's head up, while the mother here lowers her head down, trying to hide her deep sorrow. It is equally significant to note how the officer looks down on the dead son, Jack. For him, Jack is only a "useless swine", who is seized by panic.

Sassoon is very angry especially with the politicians at home, who were insistent on continuing the war despite all the great losses in lives or in economy, just to build their personal glory at the expense of young men's lives and suffering, though they claim patriotism. In the last lines of his poem "To Any Dead Officer", he says, addressing the dead officer:

**Good-bye, old lad! Remember me to God,  
And tell Him that our politicians swear  
They won't give in till Prussian Rule's been trod  
Under the heel of England.... (p. 8)**

In many of his poems, Sassoon shows humanitarian sympathies with the German soldiers and their afflicted mothers. In "Reconciliation", he asks the English publics that visit their dead sons to remember the German soldiers while they are praying for their sons. He says:

**When you are standing at your hero's grave,  
Or near some homeless village where he died,  
Remember, through your heart's rekindling pride,  
The German soldiers who were loyal and brave. (p. 5)**

While in his sonnet, "The Glory of Women", he shows his sympathy with the German mothers at home dreaming of their sons' return and knitting socks to send them at the front lines while they were actually killed, lying dead in mud. He says:

**O German mother dreaming by the fire,  
While you are knitting socks to send your son  
His face is trodden deeper in the mud. (p. 3)**

Thus, Sassoon condemns the war as a futile, aggressive means that causes much suffering for innocent young men who were cheated to go through it without any solid conviction in its just causes that may form a real incentive for them to go on fighting willingly. The dominant quality in his verse is anger, as most critics agree, yet his use of simple language which comes near to the colloquial speech, his straightforward dealing with the basic concerns of soldiers in the trenches, his avoidance of artistry and high rhetorical devices, his use of short verses and common

poetic forms, especially the sonnet, and his sympathy with the soldiers in their suffering all make his poems a faithful register of the First World War and its effects on those who fought it.

### III

Wilfred Owen deals almost with the same subjects which Sassoon presents in his poems, though his approach to the subjects, the language he uses, and the irony and Biblical allusions he employs are all different from Sassoon's. If the dominant trait in Sassoon's approach to war is anger, in Owen's, it is generally regarded as sympathy, for his poems are replete with compassion for the young soldiers in their suffering.<sup>iv</sup> His language is highly figurative and subtle; it gives itself through a complex network of visual, auditory, and smelling images that make the audience share the experience as if they were actually living it. The Biblical references and allusions are mostly used ironically to expose and deepen the horror of war.

One of the recurrent themes in Owen's poems is the misery which the soldiers suffer at the front lines. In many poems, he shows the miserable conditions in which the soldiers live and die. For instance, in "Dulce et Decorum Est", we see a group of sleepy, tired and dirty troops trying to escape a gas attack. In their hurried confusion, one of them fails to wear the gas helmet in time, hence he dies horribly. At the beginning the soldiers' appalling conditions are depicted through a series of similes and metaphors that crystallize the inhuman life of the trenches:

**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 ....<sup>v</sup>**

The young soldiers are compared to old women (hags) in their coughs and bent backs. Their elegant uniforms are no more than the sacks of old beggars. Sleepy, dirty, and bare-footed, they trudge on seeking rest which they do not know where. It is clear that Owen presents this miserable life of the soldiers through powerful images that imprint the picture in the reader's mind inerasably; of these images one may mention "Drunk with fatigue" which suggests how these men are staggering in their walk due to tiredness, and the "distant rest", which may refer to the safe shelter they are trying desperately to reach or may emphasize the psychological and physical comfort they dream of but never find. Evidently, the term, "blood-shod", is a dehumanizing image, because horses are usually shod, not men. This dehumanizing image is augmented later on in the poem when the dead soldier is "flung in" a "wagon", like any animal. Confusion and fear in such horrible conditions do not allow any chance to give the young dead soldier any dignified ceremony.

In another poem, "The Sentry", these miserable conditions are again highlighted. Like "Dulce et Decorum Est", "The Sentry" shows a group of soldiers trying to escape from an inimical shelling in which one young soldier is killed. At the beginning, the soldiers' attempt to find shelter amidst bad weather conditions is described:

**Rain, guttering down in waterfalls of slime,  
Kept slush waist-high and rising hour by hour,  
And choked the steps too thick with clay to climb,  
What murk of air remained stank old, and sour  
With fumes from whizz-bangs, and the smell of men  
Who'd lived there years, and left their curse in the den,  
If not their corpses ... There we herded from the blast  
Of whizz-bangs; but one found our door at last.**

**...And thud! Flump! Thud! Down the steep steps came thumping (p. 208)**

Again, imagery plays an important role in making these scenes of misery memorable. Here, the images appeal to the various senses; all the images: visual, auditory and olfactory work together to help us see and hear and smell the bad and filthy conditions these soldiers pass through. The images: “Slush ... chocked the steps”, “waterfalls of slime”, and “the steps too thick with clay to climb”, for instance, make us see closely the hardships which face the soldiers when war and nature collaborate against them. We see the thick mud and feel the hard effort which the soldiers exert in their attempt to climb the hill. The image presented in the line “What murk of air remained stank old, and sour/ With fumes from whizz-bangs” is surely intended to make the reader smell the bad odour of the stinking den in which various bad odours are mixed to make the place unbearable to live in. As to the image in “we herded from the blast”, it reminds us of “flung in” the “wagon” in “Dulce ...” which shows the dehumanization of the soldiers who are treated like cattle. It is significant to say that this same image of the herd is also used in another poem, “Anthem for Doomed Youth”, where the opening line refers to dead soldiers as: “these who die as cattle”. (p. 193) The image is obviously intended to show the battle field as a slaughterhouse where innocent soldiers are slaughtered like sheep or cows. The onomatopoeic words “thud, flump, thud,” and “thumping” may suggest the incessant bombing and shelling.

The collaboration between nature and war to intensify the soldiers suffering is also emphasized in “Exposure” where most images connect the difficult weather with the military maneuverings and attacks. They almost all present the cold weather as a ruthless enemy who uses all his capabilities to destroy the other. Here are some lines from the different stanzas of the poem:

**Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knife us.**

.....

**Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army  
Attacks once more in ranks on shivering ranks of gray.**

.....

**Sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence.  
Less deadly than the air that shudders black with snow.**

.....

**Pale flakes with lingering stealth come feeling for our faces. (p. 190)**

Thus, nature is presented as an inimical force that is more deadly than the bullets of the human enemy. The freezing east wind, which is personified as merciless, hits the soldiers as with daggers, hence their brains ache. Dawn is personified as a military leader who has recruited his troops for an onslaught. The air itself is shivering because of snow, and this should highlight the soldiers’ acute suffering from the bitter cold. The flakes of snow are presented as very intelligent enemy soldiers that infiltrate carefully and noiselessly into the soldiers’ hideouts to attack them.

Like Sassoon, Owen severely attacks those civilians who encourage war without really knowing what miseries war brings about to warriors at the front lines. In many poems, he criticizes war propaganda which depicts the war as a sweet path for national glory. At the end of “Dulce et Decorum Est”, for example, he exposes patriotic zest for war as a big lie. After describing the horrors of war, he addresses a nationalistic advocate of war, a poetess, telling her that he is sure that if she experiences such horrors by herself, she:

**... would not tell with such high zest  
To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
The old lie; Dulce et Decorum est,  
Pro patria mori. (It is sweet to die for one’s country) (p. 192)**

The addressee in these lines is the poetess, Jessie Pope, who was famous during the First World War for her jingoistic poems which glorify the war as a right way to defend the homeland so as to encourage young men to volunteer. But, obviously, Owen does not mean this particular poetess only, he addresses all those writers at home

who have not experienced the reality of war, hence give a false image about it. The title of the poem, "Dulce et Decorum Est", and the Latin lines at the end of the poem are quoted from Horace who praises death for one's country as a sweet and right action. Evidently, Owen uses the allusion to Homer ironically. Through showing the futility of his soldier's death and the graphic emphasis on the horror of that death by poisonous gas, Owen tries to show Homer's praise as a big lie.

Likewise, Owen severely criticizes the civilians' nonchalant attitudes to the afflictions of the soldiers at the battlefields and when they are seriously wounded. In "Disabled", Owen fills his poem with compassion at a young innocent soldier whose legs are cut in war to find himself shunned and ignored by the people as a nausea. The poem also denounces the war propaganda that pushes very young men to join the war though they are still inexperienced and underage, as it attacks the negligence these men undergo when they are disabled in war. The disabled soldier does not know exactly why he has joined the war for he has no thought of Germany or Austria; he has dreamed only of the cheers and love of young girls which he enjoys briefly. But after his injury, he is tormented by the indifference of people, especially the young girls who avoid him as if he were a dangerous disease. The poem says about his feeling in his present affliction:

**Now he will never feel again how slim  
Girls' waists are, or how warm their subtle hands.  
All of them touch him like some queer disease. (p. 194)**

Clearly, the girls cannot love a cripple. Hence, their eyes ignore him and search for healthy men. Realizing this fact fills him with disgust and despair:

**Tonight he noticed how the women's eyes  
Passed from him to the strong men that were whole.  
How cold and late it is! Why don't they come  
And put him into bed? Why don't they come? (p. 194)**

Again, in "The Parable of the Old Men and the Young", Owen lashes at the political leaders or war lords who dash thoughtlessly the young men off to death. This time he uses a parable based on a Biblical allusion. The poem is a re-narration of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac as told in Genesis 22. In the Biblical story, Abraham takes his son to the wilderness to slay him in abeyance of God's command, but, because of his submission, God orders him to slay a ram instead, and the boy is saved. Owen makes Abraham, who is changed to Abram, represent the older war generals or politicians who are responsible for the lives of thousands of young men. In his poem, Owen follows the Biblical story step by step until the last few lines in which he suddenly shifts from the origin to make his Abram refuse God's command to spare his son and kill his "Ram of Pride" instead; his Abram slays his son and half the youth of Europe rather than slays his pride. This shift at the end comes as a surprise to shock the reader. Thus, we are told that an Angel addresses the older general out of heaven:

**Saying, lay not thy hand on the lad,  
Neither do anything to him. Behold,  
A ram, caught in the 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.<sup>vi</sup>**

It is significant to note that Owen changes the protagonist's name from Abraham to Abram to deprive him of the saintly qualities of the Biblical hero whose name is connected with humility, obedience, peacefulness and love of God and people. The change to Abram is more suitable for the role of war maker which the poem's protagonist plays.<sup>vii</sup>



Religious allusions fill Owen's poems. In them, Jesus Christ is usually identified with the soldier. One of these poems is "At a Calvary Near the Ancre", where the poet attacks the hypocrisy of some priests. In this poem, Christ is hanged at a shelled road,

**In this war He too lost a limb,  
But His disciples hide apart;  
And now the soldiers bear with Him.<sup>viii</sup>**

Clearly, the clergymen hide themselves; they fail the disabled Christ-the soldier, when he desperately needs them; while the soldiers alone bear with Him His agonies. The emphasis is clearly laid on the solidarity of the soldiers. The implication is that they die for their comrades, not for nationalistic or jingoistic motives; therefore they are the more truly Christ-like. Their sacrifice of themselves for the others is shown similar to Christ's sacrifice. The poem, in the second stanza, goes on to attack the priests who are absorbed in their pride:

**Near Golgotha strolls many a priest,  
And in their faces there is pride  
That they were flesh-marked by the Beast  
By whom the gentle Christ's denied.<sup>ix</sup>**

In "Strange Meeting", the poet also presents a Christ-like soldier. The poem is based on a dialogue between two English and German soldiers. The narrator, an English soldier, in a dream-like experience, escapes from the battlefield through a tunnel where he meets a dying German soldier, wounded earlier, without knowing his identity. Through the friendly dialogue, the German soldier becomes the poet's vehicle to voice his attack on the war and its futility, the politicians and their thoughtless dash toward war, and the modern world and its regression back to savageness and primitiveness. This soldier is a Christ figure in his hatred of war, in his non-violence message, in his call for love and compassion among people, and in his readiness to shed his blood for humanity. Before joining the war, he has had high dreams for the world, but he is killed prematurely and all these dreams vanish. He is sorry that he is dying and the ugly truth about the war will die with him. The politicians will go on cheating young men to join the war and be its fuel. These politicians are described as swift tigresses, who are very quick to take the decision of war and continue it until they are satisfied, without regard to the lives of young men, the war victims. Because of such politicians, progress has come to an end and the world is regressing to savageness. In a speech that reminds us of Jesus Christ, the speaker emphasizes his objection to war and violence; he is ready to pay his life in service of humanity, but not through war. Man can serve his brothers and sacrifice his life for them without shedding blood:

**I would have poured my spirit without stint  
But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.  
Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were. (p. 206)**

The true identity of the speaker is delayed to the last lines when he tells his interlocker:

**I am the enemy you killed, my friend.  
I knew you in the dark: for so you frowned  
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed  
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold. (p. 206)**

The revelation is again a shocking surprise: the dying speaker is a German soldier killed by his British interlocker, whom he calls a friend. The enemy/friend antithesis is clearly intended to highlight that these two men are really friends; they sympathize with each other; they do not hate each other outside the battlefield; what has made them enemies killing each other is the war, its supporters and propaganda. Owen, here, was prompted by a current widespread attempt to personalize the war, an attempt that claimed "that conscripted German soldiers were voluntary agents engaged in a vendetta against the British, so that one's duty was to avenge the deaths of

one's comrades, friends and, relatives."<sup>x</sup> The speaker's willing acceptance of death rather than killing the enemy is another allusion to Christ.

It is significant to refer, here, to Owen's use of half-rhyme or para-rhyme as a technical device to augment his anti-war themes in his poems. Unlike the usual rhyme in which the consonants are changed while the vowel within is retained, in half-rhyme the consonant framework is retained while the vowel is changed (friend/frowned; killed/cold). Clearly this device breaks the monotonous movement of the regular rhyme and makes the verse "acquire a more naturalistic movement."<sup>xi</sup> But In "Strange Meeting", it also contributes to the dominant note of hopelessness prominent in the poem and enhances the theme of war destructiveness by the vowel dissonance.

In some other poems, Owen grows more philosophical in his speculation about the life and death of soldiers. These poems are quieter in tone and less figurative in language, but seem more desperate in theme. In "Asleep" and "Exposure", he raises many questions concerning such theological and philosophical questions about the pointlessness of life and death. In "Asleep", sleep is presented as a benevolent creature that bestows rest on the dying soldier, a blessed relief after the hard toil and stress of war. In the last stanza, he questions after-death: Will the dead soldier be under God's merciful grace or will he meet only extinction? The poet is not sure of the answer, but what he is certain of is that, whether the dead soldier will meet God's grace or extinction, in all cases, he will escape the fate of the living soldiers who have to endure the miseries and agonies of war. The poem ends with these two lines that show the soldier's death as a blessing whatever the future is:

**He sleeps. He sleeps less tremulous, less cold  
Than we who wake, and waking say alas. (p. 205)**

As to "Futility", it speaks about a young soldier who has recently died, and arouses pity at his wasted life. It is an elegy of the youth that dies with dreams unfulfilled because of war. It also arouses questions about life, death and the pointlessness of war. The poem suggests that men grow up only to die, and nothing will bring them back even the sun. The question which the poem arouses at the end is why the sun that "wakes the seeds", "the hard clays of the cold stars", gives life to the dead vegetables, is unable to give life to the limbs and sides of the dead soldier. It asks:

**Are limbs, so dear achieved, are sides  
Full-nerved, still warm, too hard to stir? (p. 206)**

The title of the poem, "Futility" may signify the uselessness of such a question or may refer to the pointlessness of life itself where men toil and develop high dreams for the future, and when they think their dreams have become ripe, the war comes and takes their lives away and nothing can bring them back. They "leave the field half sown".

Thus, Owen attacks the First World War and exposes its futility and the miseries it brought about to the young men who fought it. This attack comes from a direct experience of that war, in which he comes face to face with the bloody atrocities and the acute pains and sufferings of men in the trenches. He shows strong compassion with those miserable fighters, who were obliged to fight a savage war in which they had no real advantage or even interest, hence he tries his best to expose the mistake of those who took the decision of war and were reluctant to stop it because of pride.

#### IV

Both Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen were soldier-poets of the First World War. They took part in action and tasted the sufferings and agonies of trench life. This direct involvement in war action disillusioned them concerning the war and its causes and objectives. Hence, they employed their poetic talents to expose the futility of war and the selfishness of those politicians who waged it and insisted on its continuity, despite the loss of millions of lives of young men and all the ruin it caused to the natural world or to the psychological well-being of those who survived it.

In their poems, the two poets deal with a wide spectrum of issues related to the war and its proceedings. They present the sufferings of men during action; they condemn the politicians and generals of war who live on wars and build their personal glories at the expense of the soldiers' lives; they criticize the civilians in general including the clergymen, and the young girls in particular, for their indifference to the soldiers' sufferings and their naïve belief in the war propaganda; and they show sympathy with the Germans whom they see as innocent victims as much as the English.

In spite of the similarities in subject matters which the two poets have dealt with, they are quite different in their approaches, techniques, the language used, and in the mood they express. Sassoon seems to be more direct, explicit, and straightforward, while Owen is more subtle, implicit, and complicated. For instance, in "Reconciliation", Sassoon asks the English mothers directly and explicitly not to visit their dead sons alone, but to remember the dead German soldiers as well, because both are innocent victims. Owen, in "Strange Meeting", shows the same sympathy for the German soldiers but his approach is totally different. He goes so far as to make the German soldier his mouthpiece who expresses humanitarian views about life and war and who condemns the war and those who wage it. He also makes him a Christ figure that loves humanity and feels ready to serve it but not through wars; a man who loves his enemy as a friend and prefers to be killed rather than kill. This approach shows the poet's sympathy but indirectly.

In many of his poems, whether "Dreamers", "Bombardment", or "Attack", Sassoon deals with the immediate, with the daily, with the passing activities of soldiers at the front lines. He follows their life in their sorrows, horrors or sufferings moment by moment or day by day, so that his poems have become a detailed chronicle of the daily proceedings of the soldiers' life in the trenches; whereas Owen deals with those universal truths about the war that transcend the present moment to reach to deeper insights into the human condition. Even when he portrays the soldiers' feelings at certain moments such as the gas attack in "Dulce...", he tries to deduce certain truths about the significance of direct contact for any authentic narration of events.

In writing his poems, Sassoon also tends to use a simple, common language, sometimes lacking in any striking imagery, with a few innovations in poetic forms. For instance in "Dreamers", he introduces a type of diction that is so realistic and unliterary where "gnawing rats", "ruined dug-outs", "lashing rain", etc. dominate the poem, while in "Suicide in the Trenches", the language is so common, non-figurative, and devoid of any imagery and rhetoric that it becomes a simple poem about the death of a simple villager. This simplicity is enhanced by the choice of short verse lines, rhymed couplets, and mostly common poetic forms, especially the sonnet and ditties. Of the poems studied in this paper, "The Hero" is different: the poet prefers the dramatic form based on a dialogue between an officer and a mother who has lost her son in war. Owen, on the other hand, seems more inclined to use a figurative language, full of high flown images and effective figures of speech as in "Dulce...", "The Sentry" and "Exposure", where language succeeds in creating memorable scenes of suffering and misery when nature and war collaborate together against the soldiers. His use of Biblical and religious allusions, as in "The Parable of the Old Men and the Young", "At a Calvary Near the Ancre", and "Strange Meeting" or the literary allusions as in "Dulce..." boosts his themes about the futility of war, the ruthlessness of war generals or politicians, and the victimization of young soldiers. One important technical innovation is the use of para rhyme which has become a characteristic of his poems, though some other poets have preceded him in using it, especially the French. Para rhyme has helped Owen to avoid the monotony of the smoothly moving rhyme and render the movement of his verse lines more natural, in addition to the fact that vowel dissonance may give a disturbing quality that suits the atmosphere of war.

Finally, if Sassoon's mood is anger and the tone is loud, in Owen, the mood is quieter, sympathetic and more reflective. In most poems, Sassoon is full of anger at those men and women at home, those who encourage the war without tasting its horrid, bitter truths. Thus, his poems become an outcry of protest against those people. On the opposite side, Owen's voice is pitched low to suit the tone of compassion that permeates through his poems. In many of his poems, he is speculative about life and death, trying to show through philosophical questions the pointlessness of war and the meaninglessness of life and death as in "Futility" and "Asleep".

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