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War Poetry: Impacts on British Understanding of World War One

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Abstract

The military and technological innovations deployed during World War I ushered in a new phase of modern warfare. Newly developed technologies and weapons created an environment which no one had seen before, and as a result, an entire generation of soldiers and their families had to learn to cope with new conditions of shell shock. For many of those affected, poetry offered an outlet to express their thoughts, feelings and experiences. For Great Britain, the work of Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen and Robert Graves have been highly recognized, both at the time and in the present. Newspaper articles and reviews published by prominent companies of the time make it clear that each of these poets, who expressed strong opinions and feelings toward the war, deeply influenced public opinion. At the start of the war, Rupert Brooke's poetry, and those like him, pushed the public to favor Britain's involvement in the war because of their favorable and patriotic attitude towards it. Such patriotism sparked images of the way a soldier should behave and look and inserted the idea that the fate of the nation is everything. As the war progressed though, the poets began to express a darker twist on the country's involvement. This dissenting opinion from poets like Sassoon, Owen and Graves incited irritation and anger from the British public because of their descriptive and shocking contents. Furthermore, their poetry created a new memory of the war which encapsulated its darkest, most painful realities. The influences of Sassoon, Owen, and Graves lasted much longer than did that of poets like Brooke and have shaped the memory of World War I in British history.

In the years leading up to World War One most Europeans believed that a general war would not occur in 1914. After the gruesome Franco-Prussian War and the success of diplomacy, Europeans were inclined to believe that war was too destructive and too irrational to bring up again.¹ These ideas were shattered by the events of the summer of 1914 and soon the world was engulfed in a new kind of industrial war in the trenches. This war was new because it employed extensively large innovations such as barbed wire, the machine gun, exploding shells, and tanks. Such a surge in technology changed the context of the war and both sides therefore found themselves having to dig in and remain locked in a tactical stalemate in the trenches. The war in the trenches was exceptionally brutal and resulted in far higher casualty rates than in previous conflicts because of their high rates of diseases.² These included nephritis, pneumonia, trench foot, and overall exhaustion.³ To make the trenches worse, the lack of movement meant that men were consistently being bombarded with bullets and bombs, which contributed to consistently higher mortality rates. Such cruel conditions had a profound effect on the minds of young soldiers and made it difficult for many to express their feelings and discuss their experiences.⁴ Paul Fussell, a well renowned cultural and literary historian who wrote *The Great War and Modern Memory*, captured the spirit of these feelings by saying “Dawn has never recovered from what the Great War did to it.”⁵ For some, such as the Englishmen Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen and Robert Graves, these feelings were expressed in the form of poetry. Each of these poets shared their feelings towards the war in descriptive and persuasive language. For Brooke, this was patriotic, and reflected nationalistic tendencies seen at the start of the war. For Sassoon, Owen and Graves, their poems dissented from Great Britain’s choice to remain in the conflict. They showed this through the use of graphic imagery, and sarcastic language. These blunt, negative attitudes, and anti-war sentiments pushed the British public to recognize many of

the difficult experiences that soldiers had to endure. As a result, their readers formed a much more negative opinion of British involvement in the war.

To understand the impacts of poetry on support for the war, it is important to understand British perceptions of the war at its start. According to Modris Eksteins in *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age*, getting involved in the war for the British in 1914 was a direct response to the modernism of German ideology at the time.⁶ He makes the argument that German ideology threatened concepts of British order which was engrained in their identity. As a result, Eksteins argued that these ideals framed the Germans as ever changing and irresponsible in the eyes of the British government and people.⁷ This indicated that the war was not just about maintaining British political, military and economic power but rather was a moral imperative. According to Eksteins, the British saw it as their duty to inform those they deemed “uncivilized” or ignorant of the social order of the “rules of civilized social conduct.”⁸ Anderson D. Araujo agrees with this concept of British morality fueling inclinations towards war, as he says that Germans were consistently de-humanized by the British media in the years leading up to the conflict. In fact, one newspaper article published in *The Manchester Guardian* in August of 1914 entitled “Public Opinion” actually referred to German actions as “immoral,” and described the German Chancellor as “pagan,” while asserting that their government was “an affront to the moral forces in the world.”⁹ The strong, morally bound language in this article demonstrates the inclination of the British media to dehumanize the Germans. Furthermore, the use of words like “pagan” and “immoral” corroborates Eksteins idea that the British likely felt a moral and nationalistic obligation to fight the Germans.

Public opinion at the start of the war was also shown by the willingness of young men to volunteer for the armed forces, and the British entered the war with an army entirely made up of

volunteers. These volunteers in the British Expeditionary force first met with the Germans in the small Belgium town of Mons and were defeated quickly with great loss of life.¹⁰ Even though this army was defeated early on, it still serves as evidence of the willingness of many to go to war in defense of their country and beliefs. In a September 1914 edition of *The Manchester Guardian*, reports suggested that in one day alone, 1,000 volunteers from Ulster, Ireland, enlisted in active service.¹¹ The beginning of the war featured a generally positive opinion of the conflict both in Great Britain and Northern Ireland. It is likely that this favorable opinion stemmed from the heavy presence of patriotism in Britain at the time. Such patriotism stemmed from a number of different British-centric ideals. First, the war began at the same time that Britain was practicing, and succeeding in, its imperialistic pursuits. In fact, in 1914, Britain maintained colonial rule over countries in Asia, Africa, Australia, North America and South America.¹² Maintaining control over the people in each of the colonies often created both xenophobic and elitist ideas about British superiority. These patriotic concepts would then translate into patriotic and nationalistic views that were held by both the British government and its people.¹³ Another contributing factor to British patriotism was the unification of and the rise of Germany after the Franco-Prussian War. In defeating France, Germany established itself as a military threat to Great Britain, thus sparking a backlash to German identity as barbaric. Furthermore, with German determination to build the high seas fleet, there was much fear over their strength in Great Britain.¹⁴ In making Germany the enemy, Great Britain utilized patriotism as a way to delineate itself from them. As a result, it was patriotic to maintain British dominance over Germany.

The optimism and patriotism that was present in the minds of the British public before World War I was present across many platforms, including that of literature. A number of British

poets expressed these ideals early on and published pro-war poetry. Of these, Rupert Brooke became the most famous. Much of Brooke's poetry preceded that of Owen, Sassoon, and Graves during the war's early stages and, as a result, he is a fitting poet to discuss first.¹⁵ Brooke came from an upper-class family and attended the prestigious Rugby boarding school as a boy where his father was the headmaster.¹⁶ At Rugby, he wrote historical poems such as "The Bastille" and "The Pyramids," which both won prizes, and he began writing for competitions in the *Westminster Gazette*.¹⁷ In his college years, Brooke found himself at King's College, Cambridge, where he joined the Apostles, a secret organization.¹⁸ It is at King's College that Brooke became active in drama and became more politically outspoken.¹⁹ Both of these traits are evident in his war poetry, and Brooke entered the Great War as a soldier in 1914 with a particularly optimistic view of British involvement.

One instance of such optimism is Rupert Brooke's sonnet *The Soldier*. In this poem, Brooke produces five sonnets starting with "Peace." It opens with the idea that Brooke is in fact thankful for the timing of his life because he gets to be part of the war. He suggests that the World War is calling his generation out of their sleep and to action so that they may take the place of the older generation. He ends the first section by saying that those who do not fight for what is right are "half-men," which signifies that he feels the war is justified.²⁰ Brooke continues with the sonnet entitled "Safety" in which he asserts that even though he is participating in a violent and dangerous war, he still feels safe in knowing that he has fought for Britain. He states "We have gained a peace unshaken by pain forever. War knows no power. Safe shall be my going, secretly armed against all death's endeavor."²¹ This excerpt suggests that Brooke understands the dangers of going to war. In fact, he describes making peace with the thought of an early death to the war. These attitudes reflect his belief in the rightness of Britain's choice to

fight, and his willingness to be a part of that choice. If he had believed it unnecessary, he would have condemned this rather than advocated for it.

The third and fourth sonnets are titled “The Dead” and, in the first of the two, Brooke suggests that even those who have died are serving a greater purpose: defending their country and its ideals. He says “honour has come back, as a king, to earth” and “nobleness walks in our ways again,” because the British are willing to stand up for their ideals of morality and righteousness.²² Such sentiments combined with the romanticism of death in the second of the sonnets make it clear Brooke feels that even death is for the greater cause of defending British concepts of morality, thus solidifying his favorable view of English involvement. In his final sonnet, “The Soldier,” Brooke speaks one of the most famous poetic lines to come out of the war. It starts, “If I should die, think only this of me: that there’s some corner of a foreign field that is forever England” and finishes with the concept of “an English Heaven.”²³ These patriotic words make it clear that the poet felt highly of his country and its decision to fight. This is likely due to Brooke’s identity as an “Englishman.” His identity is tightly bound to his country and places high importance on maintaining and fighting for “English” values. In Brooke’s mind then, the death he gives for his country is justified and that even his death will embody the English wartime efforts forever. Even in death, Brooke is doing his duty as an Englishman by allowing a part of England, his death, to remain in that foreign field forever. In this way, even death furthers Britain’s goals.

While the poem displays a distinctly positive outlook on English involvement, the British public’s response to it exemplified their agreement, as well as showing the impact a poem can have on perceptions of the war’s meaning. After the poem was published in 1915, the Dean of St. Paul’s cathedral in London read it on Easter Sunday. *The London Times* also reprinted it and that

garnered mass public approval.²⁴ A contemporary newspaper article written about Brooke said that the sonnets were “incomparable” and the expression of his feelings on the war within it would “be shared by many thousands of young men” who would be entering combat as well.²⁵ It is clear in this official review of the sonnets that their content was important for English readers, who were often middle to upper class.²⁶ In asserting that soldiers would resonate with its contents, the author is suggesting that Brooke’s poems would create a special sense of national community as they exemplified common feelings that people had at the time.

The fact that Brooke died shortly after this poem was published seems to have further impacted English opinion on the war, as Brooke became a sort of martyr. He exemplified everything that a good Englishman should be; young, eager, and willing to die for his belief in British rule. The newspaper article mentioned above praised Brooke for serving with grace even though he was aware of the likelihood of death. The article suggested that Brooke knew England’s “beauty and majesty” and died with “absolute conviction of the rightness of his country’s cause and a heart devoid of hate for fellow-men.”²⁷ These words and the praise suggested Brooke achieved the ultimate aim of the Englishman; to give his life for his belief in English ideals. In fact, the concept of the fight being “righteous” is a common thread amongst multiple contemporary newspaper articles about the war. The media praise that he received, also shows that there was a popular attitude that it was honorable for young men to fight and die in defense of their country. An article in *The Manchester Guardian* shared these sentiments, saying that Brooke “answered the call like thousands of other young men” even though he knew he would die and he “looked unshrinking at the prospect.”²⁸ It becomes clear here as well, that media at the time held a positive opinion of his role as an Englishman and soldier. His poems clearly appealed to the public as well as shown by the fact that these articles romanticize and

sensationalize his sacrifice and his work and they were heavily distributed throughout Great Britain.²⁹ Each of these articles used Brooke as a picture of what a soldier should be; an Englishman willing to die for their country's ideals and who would prompt others to believe they should act in the same manner.

While Brooke's time in the war was short, he was an important figure of the time. His poetry is still some of the most renowned of the war and appears in numerous collections from both then and now.³⁰ Furthermore, his patriotism demonstrated a wider attitude in Britain that it was the duty of an Englishman to fight for their country's ideals, even if that meant death. This attitude was later lost as the war claimed massive casualties and soldiers faced extensive mental health issues developed from shell shock. As a result, Brooke, and his poetry, represented an innocence and optimism that was soon lost. It soon gave way to realism, gruesome descriptions, and satire which sought to demonstrate dissatisfaction with the war. Brooke's patriotism points to the end of an era and the beginning of a more critical view by subsequent soldier poets.

Thousands of other British soldiers held the same ideals of optimism and patriotism at the start of the war and this included Siegfried Sassoon. Like Brooke, Sassoon was born into a wealthy family. He attended Marlborough College, Claire College and Cambridge University but never finished his degree.³¹ Even before the war, Sassoon became a writer and he published his first book, *The Daffodil Murderer*, in 1913.³² He joined the army just before the war began but broke his arm and could not join the fight until 1915. Once in combat, Sassoon became well known for taking risks and fighting without hesitation, which led him to receive the Military Cross for bravery.³³ Even so, the shocking reality of the war heavily impacted Sassoon. In fact, some even suggested that the "bravery" for which he was honored, was almost suicidal.³⁴ These observations indicate that Sassoon was facing a dilemma about the war and his part in it.

At this point in Sassoon's narrative, he begins to shift from the optimism of Brooke and towards a more critical outlook on British involvement. In 1917 one of Sassoon's close friends was killed in battle. The death marks a turning point for Sassoon where his defiance of the war became more outspoken. Rather than take risks on the battlefield, Sassoon decided to take one that would impact more than just himself. In 1917, after his friend's death, he wrote a letter to his commanding officer that he later published in *The Manchester Guardian*. It outlined his objections to the war in an "act of willful defiance of military authority" because he believed the war was being "deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it."³⁵ At the time that he wrote the letter, there were still many people who held patriotic views like that of Brooke. Sassoon saw this patriotism as a falsehood and expressed his distaste for it. He stated that those at home did not understand the experience of being on the front and that he would no longer be a part of the pro-war lies that were being spread.³⁶ It is likely that Sassoon referred to the gruesome and violent realities of the trenches. Sassoon's attitude has clearly changed. He no longer advocated for the continuation of fighting and even reached the stage of active defiance.³⁷ Another important point is that, because of his fame as a poet, the letter received extensive attention. The idea that a decorated soldier known for his bravery would openly defy his orders to speak out against the war caught media attention. In doing so, Sassoon captivated a large audience of people who also viewed the war unfavorably and his choice to publish poems soon after this letter increased his impact on the public. People were anxious to hear what he would say next.

One reason for Sassoon's notoriety was his publication of a collection of poems entitled *The Old Huntsman* in 1917. This collection appeared in suggested reading and gift lists in both *The Times* and *The Manchester Guardian* in 1917 and received high critical acclaim for its

detailed descriptions. *The Times Literary Supplement* praised the work saying that Sassoon had a gift and that they could not wait to see what he would do with that gift.³⁸ The review said that the book succeeded in portraying the “most sordid and horrible experiences in the world” in a way that no other poet could. The author went even further by saying that the collection of poems prompted the reader to say “yes this is going on; and we are sitting here watching it” which gave them the desire to leave their place in the audience and stand up against the war.³⁹ This is a profoundly important point to make. Not only was the book important enough for *The Times Literary Supplement* to feature it, but it also prompted major praise from literary critics. Furthermore, the book’s ability to call its readers to action demonstrates the effect it had on public opinion. This sentiment was shared after Sassoon’s. The author of his tribute article for *The Times* said that the war poems in *The Old Huntsman* “left one most disgusted with the horrors of the war even fifty years later.”⁴⁰ This review demonstrates the fact that Sassoon’s poems impacted opinions on the war and continued to do so with Britain’s memory of it in subsequent decades. The poems prompted a new outlook on the war, the community and the people.

While newspaper reviews of Sassoon’s poems show that they had a profound effect shaping public opinion to oppose the war, his poetic ideas also received some pushback, and even resulted in a 1921 criminal trial for blasphemy. John Glover published one of Sassoon’s poems entitled “Stand to: Good Friday Mourne” in *The Maoriland Worker*, a labor weekly in New Zealand. The publication halfway around the world demonstrated the breadth of Sassoon’s popularity. The poem describes a morning in which a soldier in the trenches wakes up and prays to Jesus to be wounded. The poems states,

Up the trench to our bogged front line.

Rain had fallen the whole damned night.
O Jesus, send me a wound to-day,
And I'll believe in Your bread and wine,
And get my bloody old sins washed white!⁴¹

The soldier would rather be wounded than go on another day in the war. Such a comment demonstrates the deep psychological toll that the war had. The trial was run on the basis that blasphemy was “any contemptuous, reviling, or ludicrous matter relating to God, Jesus or the Bible or to the formularies of the Church of England as by law established.”⁴² Glover was acquitted in 1922 when the jury decided that the poem was not created for the blasphemy of the church but rather, was a realistic description of the life of a soldier in the war.⁴³ Even though Glover was acquitted, the fact that this issue went to trial is important. While the trial was in New Zealand, it was still connected to Great Britain as the trial was run on a definition of blasphemy that referred to the Church of England. Also, the fact that the trial was reported upon by a major English newspaper further makes the point that it affected British hearts and minds. The final verdict suggesting that the poem was in fact an accurate depiction of a soldier's experience in the war exemplifies the point that the negative experience Sassoon's poetry portrayed was what public opinion agreed to be truth. As a result, it can be seen that the poems of Sassoon impacted public views of the war as an affirmation of people's feelings.

Siegfried Sassoon exemplified a noticeable shift in British ideals of the war. His early patriotism and bravery demonstrate a link between his experience and that of Rupert Brooke. Both demonstrate a willingness to fight and die for their country. Both, at least at first, exemplify the workings of a proper Englishman who fights for his country's ideals. Yet, Sassoon takes a different turn. After the death of his friend, he could no longer remain quiet about his opinion of

British involvement in the war and he chose to speak out against it. This turn of events begs the question of whether or not Brooke would have likely remained patriotic or turned unconvinced of the war's righteousness as well had he lived longer. Regardless, Sassoon's poetry contains a tone that was largely absent to the voice of soldier poets before him. He uses satire, like in "Stand to: Good Friday Mourne" to appeal to his audience and indicate his distaste of Britain's involvement. This shift is important as its one of the first times we see open defiance of the war. Furthermore, Sassoon's past as a patriot demonstrates that even those who were very sure of Britain's place in the war began to feel disillusioned from the pro-war sentiments that they originally believed.

Sassoon's transition from patriotic poet to anti-war satire was much rougher than that of the next poet; Wilfred Owen. Unlike Siegfried Sassoon, Owen was born into a middle-class family where his father worked on the railroads. Owen's family consistently struggled with money and the family had to move a number of times.⁴⁴ Owen began writing poetry in primary school and eventually got into London University but was unable to pay the bill to attend. Instead, Owen decided to teach at Berlitz School of English in France.⁴⁵ Owen moved back to England and enlisted in the armed forces in 1915 and was wounded in battle three times by 1917.⁴⁶ During his time in battle, Owen experienced the horrors of the war and was diagnosed with shell shock. He was sent to Craiglockhart War Hospital for treatment where he met Sassoon and the two sparked a close friendship.⁴⁷ It is this meeting that leads Owen to be the next poet of discussion. Both Owen and Sassoon held a similar outlook on the war at the time of their meeting. They were both exceptionally effected by the horrors that they witnessed in the trenches, as demonstrated by their shell shock, and no longer felt the same patriotic connection to their country's decision to remain in the fight. Owen signifies a sharp difference to that of

Sassoon thought because of his descriptive ability. While Sassoon's work may have impacted Owen's, he did not experience nearly as much trouble or push back as Sassoon did. Where Sassoon chose to use satire, Owen employed extensive imagery. As a result, Owen was able to capture a wider audience's attention without receiving as much anger in return.

One reason that Owen's poems did not experience as much push back is the fact that Owen was killed in battle just a week before the armistice and much of his poetry was published posthumously.⁴⁸ This meant that the poetry came after the war ended, when the British public was more wary of the war. Many of the obituary articles written for Owen later reminisce about his death and ponder what the future of poetry might have been had the armistice not ended two weeks earlier.⁴⁹ Regardless, Owen's poems resemble Sassoon's in their criticism of the war. For instance, in "Anthem for Doomed Youth" Owen states,

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.⁵⁰

Owen's words describe those who go to war to fight for Britain as cattle. Doing so suggests that they are only being raised for slaughter, which demonstrates his skepticism of the war's motives. Owen also refers to the guns of the war as "Monstrous" and angry which demonstrates his disdain for the machines of war that he encountered. These words differ greatly from the patriotic words of Brooke, who made even death sound beautiful, and are brutally honest. Even so, Owen is not employing sarcasm or humor to get his point across like Sassoon. Instead, he is descriptive and frank with the reader about his reality. These literary choices are what set Owen apart from both Brooke and Sassoon.

Even after his death, Owen's choice to write in such a manner attracted audiences and prompted his readers to sympathize with his unfavorable view of the war. One example of this concept can be seen in an article written two years after his death. In this article, a writer for *The Times* suggested that many war poets attempted to portray disenchantment with the war but none succeeded in the way that Owen did. He did so with more "compassion for the disenchanted" than any other poet and "revealed the soul of the soldier as no one else has revealed it." The article ended by saying his work "will not easily die."⁵¹

Of particular importance concerning this impact was Owen's poem "Dulce Et Decorum Est." This poem, published posthumously, describes the horror of the trenches by outlining what it was like to be in a gas attack. These descriptions are agonizingly graphic and portray the feeling of sadness and dread that many soldiers felt on the front lines. Owen describes the scene thusly:

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.⁵²

The description here is graphic and provides the reader with an image of run down and tired men who give little attention to the life-threatening conditions that they are under. These words are honest and clear about the experience of young men throughout the war. There is no glory in these words. There is no hero. There is only nameless men who are already in many ways gone.

The most famous part of this poem is the final words in which Owen declares:

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,—
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.*⁵³

In these words, Owen is making a very pointed statement at the British government and people, that they do not in fact know the horrors of war. Owen is asserting that if they did, they would not distribute pro-war propaganda that glorifies a soldier's death. Furthermore, he is establishing a disdain for the false nationalism that so many had at the start of the war.

While there were not many direct reviews of the poem at the time it was published, its impact can be seen in the references people made to the poem to protest issues of the war. For instance, in 1929, *The Manchester Guardian* published an article in which former officers of the World War appealed for the right to work. At the end of this article, the former officers quoted the final lines of the poem and then suggested “we are afraid that rather too much emphasis has been laid on the honour of the dead to the detriment to those who were the comrades of those who died.”⁵⁴ While the article does not specify the writer's opinion of the poem nor mention the poem by name, the circumstances and analysis of that quote suggest a correlation between Owen's writing and the soldier's intent. In speculating on the misplaced worth of the dead over that of the living, the speaker is referencing many underlying themes of Owen's poem which question the role of nationalism in forcing men to die for their country. Furthermore, in suggesting that the country is overemphasizing the dead, the speaker is connecting war attitudes of former soldiers in Great Britain with that of Owen's, thus creating a sense of community in

these ideals. It is clear then that Owen's poem impacted these people's opinion of the war and how they perceive Britain's role in it after the fact as they were willing to use his poetry as a political tool and identified it with their own feelings as well.

Owen's ability to relate to his reader is a strength that sets him apart from Brooke and Sassoon. His poems were brutally honest and deeply critical of the war, and yet, Owen was able to maintain high levels of public approval. The difference here is that Sassoon's opposition to the war was more politically divisive than was Owen's. Where Sassoon angered people with satirical verse, Owen paid respect to the dead with his description. He in many ways, memorialized the death of so many soldiers while showing disdain for the reason that they died. In this way, Owen was able to maintain his anti-war narrative, and also maintain the support of those who were originally willing to lay down their life for their country, like the former officers who quoted his poem.⁵⁵ He showed disdain for the war, without making the reader feel attacked in the way that Sassoon's readers might. Owen therefore marked an important shift from Sassoon and Brooke's writing as he wrote about the struggle of the soldier in a unifying way rather than a critical one. At the same time, he was much more obvious than the next poet up for discussion: Robert Graves.

Like Owen, Graves was born into a middle-class family. His father was a school-master in Wimbledon and his mother came from a wealthy German family. After attending a number of schools, Graves gained a scholarship to Charterhouse where he gained a love of poetry.⁵⁶ Graves decided to join the British army when the war broke out in 1914 and was a part of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers.⁵⁷ Like Sassoon and Owen, Graves suffered from shell shock and in 1916 he was badly wounded by shrapnel at the Battle of the Somme and had to remain in England until the

end of the war.⁵⁸ Even though he spent this time on leave, Graves saw his fair share of wartime atrocities, which he shared in his poems.

Grave's poems, like Sassoon's and Owen's are some of the most well-known to come from this era. In many ways, Graves' poems were unique from the other three as he is the least aggressive in expressing his distaste for the war. Instead, one feels the presence of the war in his psyche throughout his poems, regardless of their intended content. For instance, poems like "The Next War," published in his book *Fairies and Fusiliers*, outline Graves' worries and warnings about society's tendency toward war. He warns that young kids who fight for play and imagine war are doomed to repeat the mistakes of their elders and go to war as well saying,

So hold your nose against the stink
And never stop too long to think.
Wars don't change except in name;
The next one must go just the same,
And new foul tricks unguessed before
Will win and justify this War.⁵⁹

Graves is establishing that he has a negative opinion towards war in general as he believes that they are all the same. This tactic allows Graves to speak out against the war without pointing to the British government as the problem. This broad net approach is safer in many ways to that of Sassoon as it is easily relatable for readers and still not necessarily unpatriotic. The book containing this poem was widely publicized, suggested in multiple newspapers, and was said to have thrown the entire poetry era into a new perspective. A review by *The Manchester Guardian* suggested that this book, and the poetry it contained, was a delight to read, showed great dignity, and proved that he was one of the most interesting of the new poets at the time.⁶⁰ This submits

that he indeed was very important in poetry for the era and that poems like these were getting attention. This also suggests that the content of these poems was presenting some new ideals about the war which others may not exemplify. Such a concept presents the point that his work did in fact impact people's outlook on the war, if only to give a fresh perspective.

While these early poems were very important, it was one of Graves' later works which drew attention and impacted perceptions of the war. This was the publication of his autobiography entitled *Goodbye to All That* in which he finally faced the issues of the war and its effect on him. In this book he goes into depth on his experiences with the conflict and how it has impacted him physically and mentally. He also goes into detail on his post-war trauma and comes to terms with the long-term effects of what he went through.⁶¹ Graves received rave reviews for this book. One review in *The Observer* suggested that the reviewer would not be surprised if fifty or a hundred years from then the book would be considered one of the greatest works of the first three decades of the twentieth century.⁶² Such a review of the work shows its importance and popularity at the time. Another review suggested that the book was one of the few autobiographies of the time that "bears the unmistakable stamp of truth."⁶³ Such praise is extremely important as it proposes that the author agrees with the point of view Graves had and submits judgements that his story stands out amongst the rest. This idea emphasizes the impact of Graves' writing on society's understanding of the war at the time because readers identified with what he said and saw it as truthful to their experience.

Graves' poetry was, like Owen's and Sassoon's, some of the more critical of Britain's involvement in the war. What made Graves unique though was actually what happened years later. The introduction of *Goodbye to All That* into the World War I narrative demonstrated just how much the war effected soldiers' minds. In describing his own experience with shell shock

and injuries in a candid manner, Graves was telling the story of more than just himself. Rather, in historical memory, Graves told the story of millions of soldiers who experienced what he did. In this way, it is his autobiography that heavily impacted readers rather than his poetry. His ability to create a lasting memory for both soldiers at the time, and generations to come distinguishes his work from Brooke, Sassoon and Owen. In this way, Graves impacted public opinion of Britain's involvement in WWI for generations to come.

Brooke, Sassoon, Owen, and Graves each utilized their poetic lens to establish their opinion on the First World War in different ways. Each of these poetic lenses had distinct effects on their British readers and pointed to a specific opinion of the war that they each held. Brooke's poetry demonstrates the pro-war sentiments of many people in Great Britain at the start of the war. He utilized particularly patriotic language which appealed to many readers at the time who believed that Britain was right to go to war with Germany. Furthermore, in his life and poems, Brooke demonstrated all of the makings of a proper Englishman. This was to believe in your country and its ideals enough to lay down your life for them. Such a narrative appealed heavily to young people who were eager to show their worth and fight for their country, and as a result, Brooke's poetry exemplifies the larger cultural attitudes towards war at the time in Britain. It shows an innocence at the start of the war that was soon lost with Sassoon, Owen, and Graves, and which might have been lost in Brooke had he survived. Even so, Brooke's optimism and patriotism were not accidental. His poems aimed to speak to this generation of young Englishmen and put forth the idea that the war was justified. As a result, his poetry was widely produced in Great Britain and consumed at the start of the war, thus impacting public opinion in a much more positive way than that of Sassoon, Owen, and Graves.⁶⁴

While Siegfried Sassoon's experience began very similarly to Brooke's, its results were vastly different. Sassoon instead chose to use his poetry as a tool to demonstrate the wrongdoing of the British government in prolonging the war. This is particularly evident in his letter to a commanding officer where he makes accusations that the government wants the war to continue. Sassoon went even further in his poetry to utilize satire as a way to establish these points. In doing so, Sassoon represented an important shift in war poetry of the time and in his attitude towards it. Sassoon was no longer the patriot Englishman who won a medal for Bravery and blindly followed his command. Instead, he was going to take a stand against these innocent ideals. Where much of Owen's and Graves' work was published toward the tail end of the war, Sassoon's criticism of the war occurs earlier. The push back that Sassoon's poetry received demonstrates that he was amongst the first to do so successfully and in many ways, his poetry may have paved the way for Owen's and Graves' work to be received by the public. It is not uncommon that the earliest examples of a shift in public opinion are met with hostility, but Sassoon did not let up. As a result, his poetry became better received towards the end of the war and in the years after its end, suggesting that he did in fact, influence public outlook on British involvement in the war.

Owen's descriptions and honest depiction of the British soldier distinguish him from Sassoon because he was able to do so without as much push back. In fact, his painstakingly accurate and detailed descriptions of the horrors of the trenches were particularly popular at the time and have been since. Owen expressed his disdain for blind patriotism and those who pushed young men off to war but also created poems that soldiers were able to relate to. As public approval for the war declined, Owen's poems gained popularity and were more widely produced, appearing in the *London Times* and the *Manchester Guardian*.⁶⁵ Rather than being divisive like

Sassoon's satire, Owen's descriptions created memorials to the fallen soldiers he wrote about in a similar way to that of Graves.

Graves' poetry often alluded to his distaste for war and by extension, British involvement in it. It is his book *Goodbye to All That* that marks a distinct departure from that of Owen. This book's detail about Grave's experience with the horrors of the war and his journey in coming to terms with those horrors incorporates the experience of soldiers both during the war and after. These experiences establish a new perspective on the war that did not aim to stop the war, as it was already over, but to understand it. This is an important and final step to this process. In understanding and interpreting the psychological remnants of the war for soldiers, Graves is establishing a narrative by which the war will be remembered. As a result, Graves' work continues to impact his readers' understanding of the war and its legacy as he informs the reader of its long-term impacts.

It was through the works of Brooke, Sassoon, Owens, and Graves that we remember the war. Their poems not only display the experience of the British soldier at the time, but also provide snapshots into the progression of opinions about the war. Their poems shine light on an important truth; people became more and more disillusioned with the war as time went on. The public then received this poetry in a manner that reflected their own opinions about the war. This is a major reason that these poets fall where they do. Brooke, who was famous early, gave pro-war sentiments. Sassoon dealt with the prolonged suffering of the war while Owens attempted to demonstrate its horror. Finally, Graves attempts to understand how to deal with the aftermath of the fight and the psychological toll it took on him. Each attempt to demonstrate their unique experience for the time and as a result, others were interested in their work. The fact that each of these poets represents a snapshot of their time then impacts current reader's memory of the war.

Rather than considering it to be a singular and linear fight, the war seems to be, like humans, constantly changing. It is more complex and fluctuating than a simple black and white picture might suggest. Instead, this poetry allowed a space for soldiers to express their pain and for the general public to recognize it. As a result, these works may be useful to better understand the effects of war on the human brain and also the way in which that brain develops over time. In this way, the soldier poets of the First World War push our understanding of the impacts of war both on society, and on individuals.

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