

Different Perspectives on the Great War in British World War One Poetry

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World War One Poetry

Završni rad

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Abstract:

The Great War was one of the deadliest global conflicts in modern history which reshaped the world. There are different perspectives on war and its purposes. On the one hand, Rupert Brooke's poems "The Soldiers" and "Peace" present the view of the patriotic Englishmen which romanticized war as a noble opportunity to fight for one's glory and nation. On the other hand, there is the perspective that criticizes the illusion of a glorious war, which is presented in Siegfried Sassoon's poems "Enemies" and "Attack," Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est" and "Futility," Isaac Rosenberg's "The Dead Heroes" and "Break of Day in the Trenches" and Charles Hamilton Sorley's "When You See Millions of the Mouthless Dead" and "To Germany." Analysing World War One from a range of different perspectives is crucial for understanding the magnitude of the war and its influence on the literature of that period, which shifted from pro-war, political literature to pacifist literature.

Keywords: World War One, the Great War, Great Britain, poetry, disillusionment

Introduction

War has been present in human nature since the beginning of time. In the past, warriors fought wars in order to gain glory and to protect their nation, idealizing the honour of dying in battle. At the beginning of World War One, young men and women, following the same dream, volunteered for military service. The war shattered the illusions of glory and honour with millions dead due to modern weapons. The change in warfare influenced the literature of the time. Poetry virtually became a mass medium in Britain, allowing the poets of that time to convey their thoughts and visions of the war. Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg and Charles Hamilton Sorley, whose poetry is thematically analysed in this paper, are the main representatives of British World War One poetry. The analysis reflects on the changing viewpoints and perspectives on the Great War.

I. Historical background

The Great War was probably the most significant war in history. The use of modern warfare and a death toll of twenty million marked a new era in human history. It was a global war, fought across continents, using modern weapons, and causing mass slaughter. The war was fought between two alliances: the Allies, which consisted of the United Kingdom, France and the Russian Empire and the Central Powers, which consisted of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy. According to *The Great War: A Combat History of the First World War*, what caused World War One was the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914 (Hart 1). It is hard to believe that the death of one man can cause a global war. The real cause of the war probably consists of a number of factors. Britain was one of the main participants of the Great War, joining the war in 1914 after Germany attacked France (Sherry 20). The influence of mass media was very important for recruiting soldiers to fight in the war, and they are important for this paper as well because of the influence on the literature of the period. Poetry was used as means of propaganda. Poetry was conditioned by war, it internalized the war and was used as a “role model” for the public (Sherry 57). Government propaganda was targeted at the general public. In his article, David Welch states that the British Army was made up of professionals and volunteers. Relying on volunteers, the British had to rely on propaganda to justify the war to the public and to help promote recruitment into the military. The main goal of this propaganda was to convince people that their sacrifices would be highly rewarded. Ian Cooke states that propaganda was used as a weapon by both Britain and Germany. The government bombarded the nation with slogans brimming with patriotism, such as “Your Country Needs YOU” and “Daddy, what did you do in the Great War?” But the war wasn’t as glamorous as the media presented it. The pro-war literature was no longer able to attract readers: “The high-gloss, arcadian surface of Brooke and his companion talents lost its sheen, its credibility. A new convention formed around the strong models of (the later) Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, which featured in their discordant tones a lyric of often fierce realism” (Sherry 7). As Sherry states: “By the end of the Great War the old European order that had ruled the world had been swept away” (20). Old empires disappeared, mighty nations were left in rubble and millions died for nothing. Powerful political forces were unleashed by the war. Peter Hart and other historians state that the success of the Bolsheviks in Russia would spread Communism across the globe for the rest of the century. Fascism was created from the fall-out of the war as well. The post-war social and economic conditions left millions looking for a way out (Hart 38). World War One, from my

point of view, was a pointless war, one that brought about nothing but pain and suffering. The war had even created a new plague, the influenza virus known as the 'Spanish flu,' which spread across the globe, causing a loss of life on a scale that would dwarf even the slaughter of war (Hart 38).

II. Thematic analysis of Rupert Brooke's poetry

Rupert Brooke (1887-1915) was an English poet who in many ways embodies the legends about the Great War. He is the main representative of the patriotic pro-war poetry which is a part of the political propaganda of the British imperialism. According to the Poetry Foundation, Brooke quickly volunteered for service, joining the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve, whose first destination was Antwerp, Belgium, where he stayed through the beginning of 1915. At that time, he produced his best-known poetry, the group of five war sonnets titled "1914" (Bloom, Brooke and Sassoon 11).

According to Bloom, "The Soldier" is "perhaps Rupert Brooke's best-known and loved work and may be the most famous single poem of the war" (Bloom, Brooke and Sassoon 35). His work reveals the English political propaganda during the pre-war years which celebrated the war and emphasized of nobleness of fighting for one's nation, luring young men to join the military (Bloom, Brooke and Sassoon 35). The irony in his work is that he didn't see the horrors of war, which influenced his patriotic poems that represent an idealistic picture of war, devoid of death and destruction (Bloom, Brooke and Sassoon 12). At the beginning of the poem, the soldier foreshadows his death on the battlefield: "If I should die, think only this of me: / That there's some corner of a foreign field / That is for ever England" (The Soldier 1-3). Fear of death doesn't exist because death is the means of acquiring immortality; becoming a part of England: "In that rich earth a richer dust concealed" (The Soldier 4). England stands for more than a country for the soldier. England is a parental figure which raised him into who he is now: "A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware, / Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam" (The Soldier 5-6). He is rewarded for his deeds: "In this death, the soldier has found a way of bequeathing his possessions—his memories of his beloved England—to future generations to enjoy" (Bloom, Brooke and Sassoon 36). The soldier died for his country and for that he was rewarded by becoming a part of the English heaven: "A body of England's, breathing English air, / Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home" (The Soldier 7-8).

"Peace" is one of Rupert Brooke's most popular sonnets. Like most of Brooke's poetry, "Peace" reveals Brooke's romantic vision of war, a vision without actual war experience. Brooke sees war as one of God's great plans: "Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour, / And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping" (Peace 1-2). Brooke believes that men are designed to fight wars: "With hand made sure, clear eye, and

sharpened power” (Peace 3). Those who respond to God’s call to arms will be free: “To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping” (Peace 4). Those that refuse to go to war will be left behind: “Leave the sick hearts that honour could not move, / And half-men, and their dirty songs and dreary” (Peace 6-7). He is glad that he was chosen to participate in the war. In the following stanza, Brooke continues to build his image of a glorious war: “Oh! We, who have known shame, we have found release there, / Where there’s no ill, no grief, but sleep has mending” (Peace 9-10). The poem ends with a comforting paradox: by serving in the war, the soldiers were given the opportunity to do something meaningful with their lives – leave behind the emptiness and give their lives meaning – as if dangers are in meaningless life rather than honourable death.

III. Thematic analysis of Siegfried Sassoon's poetry

Siegfried Sassoon (1886–1967) is an English poet and novelist. According to Infoplease, Siegfried Sassoon was a heroic and decorated officer in World War I who expressed his conviction of the brutality and waste of war in grim, forceful, realistic verse. Evoking the soul-wrenching terror and brutality of trench warfare, Sassoon vigorously denounced generals, politicians, and churchmen for their incompetence and blind support of the war (Bloom, Brooke and Sassoon 43).

“Enemies” is one of Siegfried Sassoon's earlier poems which confront the question of the responsibility of killing in war. Some critics have seen the poem as a visionary homage to Sassoon's remembered love for David Thomas, who was killed by a stray bullet (Bloom, Brooke and Sassoon 46). At the beginning of the poem, a dead soldier finds himself isolated in Armageddon which represents the afterlife: “He stood alone in some queer sunless place / Where Armageddon ends” (Enemies 1-2). According to Robert Graves, Sassoon vowed revenge for his friend's death and went out every night on voluntary bloodthirsty patrols looking for Germans: “He stared at them, half-wondering; and then / They told him how I'd killed them for his sake” (Enemies 6-7). “Enemies” is not concerned with the battle itself but with that moment beyond the heat of battle that allows for reflection (Bloom, Brooke and Sassoon 46). The narrator has a sense of guilt because his life has been cut short: “Perhaps he longed / For days he might have lived” (Enemies 2-3). In the afterlife, the Germans that he killed are no longer threat—they have been rendered “patient, stupid, sullen ghosts of men” (Enemies 9). At first, the soldier is at a loss to respond: “And still there seemed no answer he could make” (Enemies 10). “The customary battle-lines of war that keep enemies apart have been obscured in death, where they are now united as victims” (Bloom, Brooke and Sassoon 47). Finally, a smile achieves what words could not, suggesting that a meeting beyond the war and suffering is possible, a meeting not as enemies but as human beings: “At last he turned and smiled. One took his hand / Because his face could make them understand” (Enemies 11-12).

Infoplease states that Siegfried Sassoon's “Attack” was one of two trench-line poems written during October 1917. His biography states that Sassoon composed “Attack” after witnessing the Hindenburg Line attack, which capped off a particularly gruelling period of the war. Sassoon wrote in his diary, “The dead bodies . . . are beyond description especially after the rain. . . . Our shelling of the line—and subsequent bombing etc.—has left a number of

mangled Germans; they will haunt me till I die” (Bloom, Brooke and Sassoon 65). The poem focuses on a morning battle which is described as “going over the top,” when “time ticks bland and busy on their wrists” (Attack 10-11). The dawn, which should bring hope, here merely brings the soldiers closer to possible death, with the sun “smouldering” through smoke that hides the “menacing scarred slope” (Attack 3). The movement of the men in battle is erratic and; the tanks “creep and topple forward” and the men are “clumsily bowed” (Attack 5-6). Everything about the men’s physical description, from their hesitant movements to their fearful countenances, is contradictory to the idealised war in Brooke’s poetry. Here the soldiers wait to be killed like animals. Being surrounded by all the confinements of war, including tanks, bombs, guns, the men are nonetheless vulnerable, exposed and alone when they go over the top. Until the last two lines, the reader’s perspective of the activity in the poem is distanced and unspecific. Only as the men climb their way out of the trenches is a single human voice heard, personifying the fear and desperation of going over the top. His cry, “O Jesus, make it stop,” reveals the true horror of the war (Attack 13).

IV. Thematic analysis of Wilfred Owen's poetry

According to Infoplease, Wilfred Owen is considered one of the great English poets of World War I, inspired by his experiences on the front lines in France to write about the morbid absurdity of war. On a visit to England in 1915 he enlisted and was eventually sent into combat in France. In 1917 he was sent back to the United Kingdom with a case of neurasthenia ("shell shock"). With Sassoon's encouragement, Owen began writing naturalistic poems about the horrors of war, while experimenting with poetic forms. Unlike Brooke, Wilfred Owen breaks through the illusion of the glorious war by condemning it and unveiling its ugly nature. Owen himself was a soldier who experienced the magnitude of the war, saying that "those fifty hours were the agony of his happy life" (Bloom, Owen and Rosenberg 12). This real-life experience had a great influence on his poetry.

According to Bloom, "Dulce et Decorum Est" is "one of Wilfred Owen's most popular World War I poems" (Bloom, Owen and Rosenberg 14). By writing this poem, Owen "hoped to destroy the glamorized decency of the war" (Bloom, Owen and Rosenberg 15). The poem begins with the description of broken and tired soldiers on the battlefield: "Bent double, like old beggars under sacks, / Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge" (Dulce 1-2). Owen realistically describes the deaths of his comrades which will haunt him forever: "In all my dreams, before my helpless sight, / He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning" (Dulce 15-16). The brutality of war is seen through the dark images of slaughter:

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 (Dulce 20-24).

Owen finishes the poem with an irony, criticizing people who believe that dying in war is noble: "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" (Dulce 25-28).

According to Bloom, Owen wrote "Futility" sometime in May 1918, and it first appeared on June 15, 1918 in *The Nation*, along with the poem "Hospital Barge." In Owen's lists of poems for publication, these two poems are placed next to each other, and the descriptive subheading for both poems is "Grief" (Bloom, Owen and Rosenberg 52).

“Futility” is one of Owen’s finest poems in which he describes the aftermath of war. Bloom suggests that the poem stays away from any overt mention of the war, focusing rather on the response to death and the attempt to understand its meaning (Bloom, Owen and Rosenberg 52). The poem begins with an image of a body of a dying soldier which is placed in the sun, the source of warmth and life in the pre-war days: “Gently its touch awoke him once, / At home, whispering of fields half-sown” (Futility 2-3). The language in this stanza carries the undisturbed memory of pre-war days; the kind sun’s gentle touch and the whispering fields are like a lullaby that offers security to the reader. While in many of his poems Owen goes to great lengths to emphasize the brutality and violence of death in war, here in this first stanza the implied death of the soldier is mixed with pre-war sleeping (Bloom, Owen and Rosenberg 52). The sun is no longer able to wake the soldier, to restore life to him: “Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides, / Full nerved, still warm, too hard to stir” (Futility 10-11). The gentle, hopeful tone of the first stanza is replaced by disillusionment in the second stanza. Continuing with the image of the natural cycle, Owen reminds the reader of how the sun creates life from seeds and crops: “Think how it wakes the seeds- / Woke once the clays of a cold star” (Futility 8-9). In the last few lines, the poet asks: “O what made fatuous sunbeams toil / To break earth’s sleep at all?”, suggesting that it would have been better had the life of the soldier not even begun (Futility 13-14).

V. Thematic analysis of Isaac Rosenberg's poetry

Isaac Rosenberg was an English poet of the First World War who was considered to be one of the greatest of all English war poets. According to PoemHunter, his "Poems from the Trenches" are recognised as some of the most outstanding written during the First World War. Rosenberg was distinguished from the other war poets by his Jewish origins and working-class background, which influenced his writing (Bloom, Owen and Rosenberg 67).

In "The Dead Heroes," we get a glimpse at Rosenberg's early patriotism. The poem begins with an appeal to the skies to welcome those soldiers who had fallen in battle. Rosenberg invokes the world beyond the realm of human beings:

Flame out, you glorious skies,
 Welcome our brave;
 Kiss their exultant eyes;
 Give what they gave (The Dead Heroes 1-4).

This world, ready to welcome the new heroes, is brighter than the world the soldiers must leave behind. Although they must give up their hold on life, the narrator promises them a new existence, "New days to outflame their dim / Heroic years" (The Dead Heroes 7-8). Their ascent to the afterlife unfolds in a set of images:

Thrills their baptismal tread
 The bright proud air;
 The embattled plumes outspread
 Burn upwards there
 Flame out, flame out, O Song" (The Dead Heroes 10-13).

In the final two stanzas of "The Dead Heroes," the soldiers are presented as being in a relationship with England, which is a parent of the soldiers: "Strong as our hurt is strong / Our children are" (The Dead Heroes 17-18). "The Dead Heroes" was written before Rosenberg had participated in the war himself. His later poems would reflect the harsher and more realistic view of war he gained after enlisting.

“Break of Day in the Trenches” is one of Rosenberg’s poems which shows a realistic depiction of the war. Rosenberg described it as “a poem I wrote in the trenches, which is surely as simple as ordinary talk” (Bloom, Owen and Rosenberg 74). It remains to this day one of Rosenberg’s best-known poems. “Break of Day in the Trenches” begins quietly. On the one hand, the reader feels a sense of uncertainty and anxiety about what the coming of dawn will bring; on the other hand, the speaker’s familiarity with it—“the same old druid Time as ever”—suggests the soldier’s resignation to the brutalities and dangers he knows the day will bring (Break 2). The scene is then brought into focus by the movement of a rat, a “live thing” (Break 3). After the appearance of the rat, the soldier pulls a poppy out of the trench earth and puts it behind his ear: “As I pull the parapet’s poppy / To stick behind my ear” (Break 5-6). The soldiers are compared to a poppy, an emblem of the British war dead. “Poppies were thought to feed off the blood that had soaked into the earth, which turned their petals red” (Bloom, Owen and Rosenberg 74). The poppy’s connection with the dead will again be alluded to in the image at the end of the poem: “Poppies whose roots are in man’s veins” (Break 23). In the next lines, the rat is shown as being able to travel freely back and forth between two front lines:

Now you have touched this English hand

You will do the same to a German

Soon, no doubt, if it be your pleasure

To cross the sleeping green between (Break 9-12).

Characterized by the soldier as “sardonic,” the rat is seen as being able to rise above the physical obstacles of human beings (Break 4). His willingness to be in the hand of either a German or English soldier reveals his “cosmopolitan sympathies” (Break 8). The rat also has a bigger chance at surviving the war than the soldiers: “Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes, / Less chanced than you for life” (Break 14-15). The speaker then tries to imagine what the war must seem like from the perspective of the rat: “What do you see in our eyes / At the shrieking iron and flame / Hurlled through still heavens” (Break 19-21). In the second half of the poem, Rosenberg concentrates on the tragic nature of human beings’ destruction of themselves and nature. The fields of France are thus described as “torn” as easily as a piece of paper (Break 18). In the final lines of “Break of Day in the Trenches,” Rosenberg returns to the poppy, the flower of the dead. He adds to this image the word “dust,” which probably

refers to the dust that covers the dead (Break 26). However, he emphasizes that he is still alive although death lingers as the dust on the poppy that he is wearing.

VI. Thematic analysis of Charles Hamilton Sorley's poetry

According to the Poetry Foundation, Charles Sorley is one of the three poets of importance killed during the war, alongside Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg. Sorley's attitude toward the war was deeply conflicted from its start (Poetry Foundation). His poetry can be described as ambivalent, ironic, and profound.

Sorley opposes Brooke's poetry with his "When You See Millions of the Mouthless Dead". "Sorely proved a powerful antidote to Brooke in quarters that mattered" (Sherry 63), as he contradicts everything Brooke claims in his poems. He speaks of the needlessness of the poems that glorify the dead because they do not have any benefit from it: "Give them not praise. For, deaf, how should they know / It is not curses heaped on each gashed head? / Nor tears. Their blind eyes see not your tears flow. / Nor honour. It is easy to be dead" (Mouthless Dead 5-8). He even goes to the extremes and mentions the easiness of dying, ignoring the actions that lead the soldiers to death, which is dreadful even though the point of the verse was to stress out that being alive is harder than being dead. The unsentimental tone continues throughout the entire poem: "Say only this, 'They are dead.' Then add thereto, / 'Yet many a better one has died before'" (Mouthless Dead 9-10). The astounding lack of emotions might be a consequence of Sorley's consistent attempt to contradict everything 'The old Lie' represents. The emotionlessness is present even in the last verses: "Then, scanning all the o'ercrowded mass, should you / Perceive one face that you loved heretofore, / It is a spook. None wears the face you knew. / Great death has made all his for evermore" (Mouthless Dead 11-14). Even though Sorley is realistic in his depiction of dying, he opposes the conventional attitude towards the deceased and their beloved by saying that there is no hope in trying to look for the dead in everyday life and that we will all die eventually, so there is no reason to fight it.

"To Germany" is a poem written by Charles Sorley which reflects his feelings for a country which has nurtured him and is now designated the enemy. "You are blind like us" is a powerful line which expresses Sorley's attitude towards the German soldiers who are the same as he is. The soldiers of both countries grope and stumble through "fields of thought," the same way they grope and stumble over the fields of battle (Germany 3-4). Sorley contrasts Germany's political ambitions with the British politics which are different, but cause hate all the same: "And we, the tapering paths of our own mind, / And in each other's dearest ways we stand, / And hiss and hate. And the blind fight the blind" (Germany 6-8). The second

stanza begins by a vision of a time “when it is peace” (Germany 9). The “truer form” in which the countries and individuals will then see each other “with new-won eyes” is one without hate (Germany 9-10). “...Grown more loving-kind and warm” suggests that they will change for the better (Germany 11). The line “when it is peace” at the end of the poem, heightens the sense of longing (Germany 13). The poem ends in a negative tone “... the storm, / The darkness and the thunder and the rain,” probably representing the inevitable bloodshed of war (Germany 13-14).

Conclusion

The devastation of World War One shattered the illusions of glory and manly honour and shaped the literature of the time. Poetry virtually became a mass medium in Britain, and poets conveyed their thoughts and visions of the war. Their perspectives ranged from the romanticized views of war as a noble opportunity to fight for one's glory and nation to a new outlook based on their personal experience which finds its full expression in the disillusionment and devastation of the Great War. Rupert Brooke provides us with a romanticized image of the war in his poetry, describing death as an honourable act and transforming soldiers into knights. On the other hand, Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg and Charles Hamilton Sorley, with their pacifist poems, provide us with an unidealized image of the bloody war which shattered the world. Analysing World War One from a range of the different perspectives is crucial for understanding the magnitude of the war and its influence on the literature of that period, which shifted from pro-war, political literature to pacifist literature. Reading war poetry raises our awareness of war and world issues and offers an insight on the emotions, thoughts and feelings of those who have experienced war and expands our abilities to view events through literary works.

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