World War I Poets: A Trajectory of War through the Study of Masculinity, Camaraderie and Intimacy

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 John Singer Sargent, *Gassed,* 1919. Imperial War Museum, London[[1]](#footnote-1).

Poetry from World War I reflects the distinct change in sensibilities that occurred during the course of the war. The early poetry sought to immortalize the traditional chivalrous codes that these poets had learned in their childhood, but the full revulsion of the trenches soon began to surface in the written work from the front. Faced with death and decay, these men found themselves also needing to deal with the “recognition of human vulnerability, empathy and caritas.”[[2]](#footnote-2) With extreme agony, misery, and hatred as found in war, people seek to find balance and familiarity. They search for security and refuge; they have a “need for pleasure to the point of madness.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Under this backdrop, the war poets wrote of the devastation of war, but also the intimacy of men, and using this as inspiration they shared with society both the atrocities and sanctities that brought and bound these men together for eternity.

War poet Wilfred Owen, in a letter to his mother, speaks of his reason for returning to the front. Owen tells of his “need to help these boys – directly by leading them as well as an officer can; indirectly, by watching their sufferings that I may speak of them as well as a pleader can.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Wilfred Owen returned to the trenches in October, only to die November 4, 1918, one week before the armistice. His ‘pleading’ can be read throughout the world as he and many other war poets have shared poems. Owen refrained from giving alarming details in his mother’s letter, but he did not hold back to fellow poet and friend Siegfried Sassoon. “The boy by my side, shot through the head, lay on top of me, soaking my shoulder, for half an hour.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Owen had seen the suffering of mankind and he had taken it upon himself to be the “voice of inarticulate boys of whom he felt he needed to testify on their behalf”.[[6]](#footnote-6) It fell to the war poets to use literature to help others conceive what a horrific scene war was, and it is in the words of these poets that one can trace the trajectory of the war.

The trajectory originated out of a “Victorian military ideology”[[7]](#footnote-7) based on gallantry and heroism. Alfred, Lord Tennyson in his 1854 poem *The Charge of the Light Brigade,* calls on men of all classes to “face the heat of battle with courage and faith”.[[8]](#footnote-8) Tennyson evokes heroism and valor in his poem:

Cannon to left of them, Cannon behind them Volley'd and thunder'd; Storm'd at with shot and shell, While horse & hero fell, They that had fought so well Came thro' the jaws of Death, Back from the mouth of Hell, All that was left of them, Left of six hundred.[[9]](#footnote-9)

These are the words that poets of the Great War era grew up on. It is poetry like this that calls upon the chivalrous Christian gentleman of the Victorian era who could afford to be more romantic and indulge in nostalgia. The Victorian poet became the foundation of modern culture and symbolism that the War poets called upon when writing of their experiences in the earlier part of the war.

The most common use of Victorian symbolism, according Paul Fussell in *The Great War and Modern Memory,* is that of the blond golden haired boy. Fussell writes that “to be fair haired or (better) golden-haired is, in Victorian iconography, to be especially beautiful, brave, pure, and vulnerable.”[[10]](#footnote-10) The poets exhibit these sentiments in their poems when describing young boys or men of whom they encounter. Fussell also writes, the young Poet Rupert Brooke was idolized because of his fair-hair and good looks. Poet Frances Cornford stated her descriptions of Brooke also as a Victorian icon; “A young Apollo, golden haired, Stands dreaming on the verge of strife, Magnificently unprepared, For the long littleness of life.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Imagery of manliness and purity, that stemmed from the Victorian era translated into the imagery of the iconic golden-haired young man.

Great War writers grew up reading of Victorian sensibilities, but those sensibilities were consecrated in the British public schools. An essential characteristic of these public schools was their affirmation of physicality, camaraderie and masculinity. This emphasis often took form through athleticism, and did so for very pragmatic reasons. “In the latter half of the 19th Century in public schools, there was a need to produce muscular Christians for the development and defense of the Empire.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Whether these young boys in boarding school where ever aware of their intended outcome, are cause for speculation, but what is certain is the manner in which they adopted the schools induction of “truth, honor and purity.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Poet Frank Ellis wrote of boys at public school; “The playing fields of England, All up and down the land. Where English boys play English games, How bright and fair they stand!”[[14]](#footnote-14) This shows the devotion they felt towards home and country.

Here the honorable sentiments of Rupert Brooke can be found in his poem *The Soldier,* which quantifies the ties to Britain and the glory that soldiers felt they would bring to their country.

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

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

Written in 1914, Brooke invoked the combined sentiments from the Victorian era and the school system, and implies that there is honor in war. This romantic poet and others like him suffused their work with the purpose of life and dedication to the cause for home and country. Love, duty and faithfulness expressed in the early poetry of the War was about to change from “country and nation to comrade and soldier”.[[15]](#footnote-15)

This sensibility that the young men carried with them to the trenches of Europe in 1914 “soon dissipated under the weight of reality.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Many thought they would find glory in Europe and young men leapt to the call of duty with honorable sentiments. The need to share the true horrors of war with accuracy and indignation necessarily grew from the War experience. It was terrifying and dehumanizing, and it drew on stark emotions in extreme situations. The nature of warfare had changed. War in the trenches was an industrious war, where flesh met metal and chivalry was dead.

This new form of combat “ravaged the male body on an unprecedented scale but also restored tenderness to male relationships.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Fussell writes of a change in Wilfred Owen after his first experiences in the trenches. Owen approached the war with optimism, but he soon came to realize that “what he encountered on the front was worse that even a poet’s imagination could have conceived.”[[18]](#footnote-18) His attitude and emotions shifted, and one can find in his words “horror, outrage, and pity.”[[19]](#footnote-19) The theme in Owen’s *Greater Love* becomes prevalent in many war poems, and it is here that one can detect the shift of sensibilities. Owen writes in one verse; “Heart, you were never hot, Nor large, nor full like hearts made great with shot; And though your hand be pale, Paler are all which trail, Your cross through flame and hail: Weep, you may weep, for you may touch them not.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Despite the full scale slaughter they faced, the war poets have legitimized World War I soldier’s efforts using poetry to celebrate the valor, spirit and intimacy they found amongst comrades and friends.

Intimacy is an accepted response of the First World War, and with intimacy comes the topic of homoerotic relationships between the men in the trenches. This is not to be taken lightly, as there is much to be said for personal closeness and human touch. “As life ebbs away, the body moves to fill the void: intimacy – touch – becomes the antidote against the desolation of death, overriding political hostility or norms of professional behavior.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Relationships that were formed in war are the last hopes of familiarity and helped to fight against the terror of the consequences of war.

Homoeroticism and homosexuality for this purpose does not translate to the intimacy that necessitated out of the First World War. Sexuality in this instance must be “apprehended without regard”[[22]](#footnote-22) to crudeness and sex. There came a standard experience throughout the war that drew out a leveling of classes within the military ranks. Men were drawn to each other out of admiration and affection. Herbert Read’s poem *My Company* speaks of care and respect towards the men within his company.

A man of mine lies on the wire. It is death to fetch his soulless corpse.   
A man of mine lies on the wire; And he will rot and first his lips the worms will eat.   
It is not thus I would have him kiss'd,   
But with the warm passionate lips   
Of his comrade here.

Read shows of the connection between commander and men on a very intimate level, and the distinction of homosexuality and intimacy must be understood. The culmination of intimacy and camaraderie is what puts the trajectory of the war poems into motion. The change that manifests from the devastation is “redeemed by the intimacy nourished among its combatants and became something of a cultural commonplace during and after the First World War”.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Physical closeness and interdependency defines the realities of trench warfare. There was always a sense of anguish balanced with a sense of camaraderie as the soldiers huddled together in the trenches. Paul Fussell quotes author Thomas Pynchon. His very real words tell about trench warfare.

In the trenches of the First World War, English men came to love one another decently, without shame or make-believe, under the easy likelihoods of their sudden deaths, and to find in the faces of other young men the evidence of otherworldly visits, some poor hope that may have helped redeem even mud, shit, the decaying pieces of human meat…While Europe died meanly in its own wastes, men loved. [[24]](#footnote-24)

It is a raw account of the daily routines that men encountered. What stands out is the word love. And so a question of whether there is room for love in war seemed to become the goal of war poets in the latter half of the war.

Poets such as Owen, and Read, sought to document the intense bonds of masculinity, friendship and love of the men they fought with. Owen is perhaps the best noted poet who attempted to be the voice of the dead. Owen’s poem *Strange Meeting* shows the intimacy of all men in the war – even the enemy. “'Strange friend,' I said, 'here is no cause to mourn.’ ‘None,' said that other, 'save the undone years, The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours, Was my life also’.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Owen shows the man to man relationship that is found in war, and even with the enemy. Strange Meeting captures the need to be in the vicinity of someone who understands the level of evil that is around them and though that common bond they find intimacy. “The common suffering of the war could make for more tender male relationships as well as potentially brutalizing them.”[[26]](#footnote-26) Intimacy existed but there were other reasons why war poets felt they needed to write.

Among them these reasons was the unnerving knowledge that there were those outside of the front who encouraged and applauded the war effort. These men “took pride in their ability to fight heroically and ruthlessly until they dropped or died but many became angered at the ecstatic crowd at home that cheered them on and applauded the carnage.”[[27]](#footnote-27) This tone is perhaps most noted in Siegfried Sassoon’s poetry. In Sassoon’s *The Poet as Hero*, he mocks and loathes war, but he still attempts to redeem the suffering of the war and be the voice of the dead.

You've heard me, scornful, harsh, and discontented,   
Mocking and loathing War: you've asked me why   
Of my old, silly sweetness I've repented--   
My ecstasies changed to an ugly cry.

Sassoon wrote this poem in 1916 after the destructive Battle of the Somme, and it is clear that he is vengeful of the war as well as anyone who should ask him of his sensibilities. In the poem Sassoon is bitter and angry towards what he labels as lies told to him in his youth. All that he witnessed on the warfront has jaded his perception of reality, and he uses his poetic talents to relate this to the world.

You are aware that once I sought the Grail,   
Riding in armour bright, serene and strong;   
And it was told that through my infant wail   
There rose immortal semblances of song.   
  
But now I've said good-bye to Galahad,   
And am no more the knight of dreams and show:   
For lust and senseless hatred make me glad,   
And my killed friends are with me where I go.   
Wound for red wound I burn to smite their wrongs;   
And there is absolution in my songs.

“Even the most educated and intellectual inclined, often found it difficult to explain to others or themselves why they were there, suffering and dying.”[[28]](#footnote-28) It is only thorough the war poets that the true emotions and sensibilities are revealed to the world both during and after the war ended.

The dichotomy of the war is found most prevalent in the very different tones of Rupert Brooke and Wilfred Owen. Brooke never saw actual combat and his words are infused with the Victorian sensibilities that all war poets knew pre-war. Owen has a very different tone that stems from his experience in the trenches with the men whom he felt inclined to represent to a very intimate level. His was a devotion emphasizing “individual submission and group solidarity, which found its culmination in the theatre of war.”[[29]](#footnote-29) The trajectory of World War One poetry is an accurate and practical expression of masculinity, camaraderie and intimacy.

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