The Portrayal of a Soldier in the Poetry of World War I

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Završni rad

Mentor: doc.dr.sc. Ljubica Matek

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Bachelor's Thesis

Supervisor: Ljubica Matek, Ph.D., Assistant Professor

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IZJAVA

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Abstract

World War I poetry is regarded to this day as one of the most unique and powerful types of poetry. It is something unparalleled when compared to modern poets and their work. Writers have been depicting traumatic and surreal events for ages, but the poems from the Great War have a shattering authenticity that sets them off from other poems. These poems try to capture the reality of war which cannot easily be captured with simple or complex words and phrases, yet they succeed in doing so. Not all war poets were soldiers themselves, some of them were non-combatants and women, but they all play an important role in this one-of-a-kind literary period. The soldiers are the focal point of war, but the men that had not enlisted, and the women both taking care of things at home and taking over male jobs in factories were all an immense and essential part of this unprecedented bloodshed. Siegfried Sassoon was both an accomplished author and a skilled soldier, among the few who actually survived the war and went on to accomplish great feats in their lives. However, not only did the majority of the authors die in action, like Wilfred Owen and Isaac Rosenberg, but some of them never even made it to the front. The most famous non-combatant in World War I poetry is Rupert Brooke, and his style of writing differs immensely from the other war poets. This paper will look at the various representations of the character of a soldier in selected WW1 poems.

Keywords: World War I, poetry, soldier, Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, Rupert Brooke.

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Introduction

The humankind has gone through a great number of disasters throughout its history, and one of the bloodiest events was World War I. Millions upon millions lost their lives while fighting the good fight, believing that they were participating in a "war to end all wars". As history shows, this was not the case. Many soldiers died in battles for which there was no real need. These battles happened either to show the strength of a nation or because of a feud over a couple of centimetres of land. The whole world was devastated for years to come. But, there seems to be a silver lining in this disaster after all. This tragic event bore a new kind of poetry the world has not yet seen. War poetry changed the face of literature as we know it. To be more specific, the poets of this period introduced us to a whole new understanding of the word "war". There are many authors that contributed to this, such as Sassoon, Brooke, Owen, Rosenberg, and many others.

This paper will analyse how selected war poets depicted the common soldier during World War I, how their representation differs from other literary depictions of soldiers, and how almost every single one of the authors had a slightly, if not entirely, different take on the combatants of the Great War which proves that they managed to capture the essence of humanity, the vast differences between people, without resorting to caricature, simplification or, for the most part, idealization. The first chapter introduces the reader to World War I poetry, explaining its origin and importance. The second chapter serves as an analysis of four major war poets and their writing styles – Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, Siegfried Sassoon, and Rupert Brooke. Two poems by each of the four poets are analysed with regard to how they depict soldiers in different scenarios.

1. World War I Poetry

There are multiple definitions of the term "poetry", that is of what is considered a poem and what is not. Eagleton suggests that a "poem is a fictional, verbally inventive moral statement in which it is the author, rather than the printer or word processor, who decides where the lines should end" (25). By this definition almost anything and everything can be a poem if the author presents it as such. He denotes that a poem is something fictional, but it seems that World War I poetry disproves that notion as every event denoted in these poems was the harsh and uncensored reality. With this idea in mind, it seems that every soldier on the battlefield could have been a potential war poet, but that is not exactly the case here as the surviving poems have shown. At the early stages of their career war poets are faced with criticism which denigrates their contributions as, so was claimed, anyone can pick up a pen and call themselves a poet or a writer. Literary critics were generally against this type of poetry at the beginning, because that style of realistic and unprecedented writing went against everything people knew about poetry. First, it was not fictional as poems were claimed to be. The authors did not make anything up, they wrote about their surroundings and traumatic events that they went through. They used words to evoke the same emotion that they felt at the time of writing. Second, the poets did not use any sort of "tradition" in which they wrote poetry because they invented something new, breaking down the traditional notions of poetry. Only those ideas, Gombrich says, "that can be adjusted to the reality of formal structures become communicable and their value to others rests at least as much in the formal structure as in the idea. The code generates the message" (*Art and Illusion* 36). Clausson further explains that "without a code, without a language, not only is it impossible to express what one wants to say, but it is also impossible to have anything to say in the first place — a view of language that those still in the grip of expressivist, Romantic and humanist theories of literature find threatening" (Clausson 105). Their code was language, that is true, but they used it in a new way.

This kind of writing was born in trenches, which is why it could not have relied on previous traditions or perspectives of the world, making war poetry unique and shocking. Although there was always violence between people, between nations, and wars were constantly fought, and soldiers were always killed, this time it happened on such a scale that it was hard to comprehend it. Nine million people died over the course of just four years. War poetry was created literary out of nothing; it was not a variation on some other form of writing, but a product of human suffering. According to Gombrich, "The familiar will always remain the likely starting point for the rendering of the unfamiliar; an existing representation will always exert its spell over the artist even while he strives to record the truth" (qtd. in Clausson 104). The starting point will always be something

familiar, but there was nothing familiar about war. There is also a reason why there are no such poems and poets after World War I:

> When World War One broke out, not only was there no tradition of soldiers writing poetry (the few famous English poems about war, such as Tennyson's "Charge of the Light Brigade," were not written by combatants), but there was simply no English tradition of war poetry upon which a modern poet could draw to write about trench warfare. Blunden, certainly the most scholarly of the war poets, searched in vain for one. In the absence of such a tradition, the single greatest problem facing Blunden, Sassoon, Rosenberg and their fellow poets was to identify an existing set of literary conventions (what Gombrich calls a "code"), which would enable them to write about the new kind of war experience they encountered in the trenches of France and Flanders. (Clausson 106)

Blunden was one of the most famous authors during the war, but he was also one of the very few who survived the living hell that is war and continued educating himself and to write. Many tried to find this so called "code" so that they could either make their own form of war poetry or just directly copy it. But, there were more than two thousand World War I poets, so there was no clear way of finding the code. Most of them started writing because they could not sleep or because it helps them ease the shell-shocked nerves. Authors like Sassoon and Brooke started writing even before the war, but the clear distinction is in the fact that Brooke died in 1915. He was never in the trenches; he barely enlisted and was already gone. His style greatly differs from that of Sassoon's or Owen's because of his premature departure. Sassoon and Brooke were even compared because of their similar early poetic nature:

> Siegfried Sassoon, who until 1915 had followed a similarly privileged path and written poetry strikingly similar to Brooke's, went on to write some of the conflict's most cynical anti-war poems. Might we have expected a similar development in Brooke? Whatever the possibilities in answer to this question, it is precisely the fact that such a development was not realized that must draw a clear distinction for critics between Brooke and the later Georgian War Poets. (Magella 7)

Clausson also suggests, that these pre-war poems were influenced by the Romantic lyric and that "most of them retained the Romantic lyric as their primary inspiration, but they transformed it into a new lyric form, the trench lyric" (107). Theoretically, the influence of the Romantic lyric on the Poetry of World War I arises from the Romantic need to express strong and yet authentic passions, which is why it is difficult to faithfully recreate this kind of poetic masterpieces.

2. The Depiction of a Soldier

There was an abundant number of young men that joined the army in 1914 and 1915. Most of them were eager to fight for their country; some did not know what else they could do aside from fighting; others were seduced and tricked by the war propaganda that influenced everyone. With so many enlisted soldiers squatting in a trench for days on end, a small portion of them were bound to become something more than a target for the enemy troops to shoot at. Many of them had received little to no education, coming either from poor, low-income families or their studies were cut short because of the war. Sitting, sleeping, eating and taking lives in the same hole they called a trench would drive a man to insanity. Few of them could sleep peacefully, but most of them were either scared to their bones, suffering from shellshock without even knowing it, or just lying there in the dark. While the rest of them were trying to get some sleep, young men like Owen and other soldier poets could not. They transferred the horrors they have seen onto paper, hoping it would help them cope with the situation or prevent more young men enlisting for this futile war. This was the beginning of trench poetry. Some of the combatants tried their luck with poetry even before the war had broken out. Owen and Sassoon are some of the authors that had started writing early on and continued during, and some of them even after the war, but they never thought that, like most other war poets, they would do their best work while living for weeks in a muddy, bullet-ridden trench. The focal point of their poems was, of course, war and the soldiers fighting it. The soldiers described in their poems were more often than not real people they have met during their time in the trenches. Some of them could have been made up by the author to prove a point or to evoke a strong feeling in the reader, but their imagination was surely inspired by something very real.

2.1. Wilfred Owen

Although one of the most famous and well-known war poets, Wilfred Owen never made it past World War I. Born in a middle-class family in Oswestry, he was not the usual type of a man one finds among the English troops. Already as a child, he was more of an artistic spirit than a fighter and he began writing even before he enlisted, although with little success. When the war broke out, he was conflicted about it and wrote his thoughts to his mother: “I can do no service to anybody by agitating for news or making dole over the slaughter. On the contrary I adopt the perfect English custom of dealing with an offender: a Frenchman duels with him; an Englishman ignores him” (Bloom 11). Finally, he enlisted but gave up on writing and dedicated himself to be the best solder he can. In 1917 he suffered from a very common disorder at the time – shellshock.

This lead to “the most fortunate event of Owen’s brief life” (Bloom 12). The hospital where he was recovering could be labelled as the starting point of his successful literary career. There he met Siegfried Sassoon, a fellow war poet, “thus beginning an important and productive literary friendship” (Bloom 12). Sassoon helped him a lot, gave him the courage to keep writing and even mentored him by correcting his mistakes and expanding his vocabulary. This friendship was the push he needed to start writing again, and it connected the two poets in more ways than one:

> Vivian de Sola Pinto, Sassoon’s second-in-command, described how the civilian and military sides formed “Two Nations”. Sassoon later explained that “the essence of my war poems was fellow feeling for the troops, whose sufferings were so remote from the comprehension of many civilians”; likewise, Owen returned to the front in 1918 “in order to help these boys . . . indirectly, by watching their sufferings that I may speak of them as well as a pleader can”. (Krockel 2-3)

Owen returned to battle not just to lead his men to victory, but to speak of them and their turmoil if they do not survive. Ironically, Owen was the one who did not make it, and Sassoon had to speak about his departed friend, about the anguish he went through and his bitter end on the battlefield.

One of Owen's most famous poems is “Dulce et Decorum Est”, which he wrote in an attempt to demonstrate “the gap between the reality and fantasy of war” (Bloom 16). The soldiers in this literary work are described as being in constant agony: “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” (5-7). Considering all the dangers that a soldier could face in war, the loss of his boots does not seem so significant, but it was the worst kind of problem they faced. Because of the deep mud and water in the trenches, they often suffered from a disease called trench foot. The long exposure to water and mud caused the tissue on their feet to rot and fall off, making them more of a liability than a part of the battalion. Owen wanted to show how things that may seem trivial in peacetime often turned out to be of vital importance in war. It was a strategy to show how extremely the war changes our perception of reality, of what is important and how profoundly it changes people. The soldiers were also tired, blind, and even deaf from all the gunshots and explosions. As explained by Bloom, they did not fight “in the hopes of achieving some noble aim, but rather simply toward some brief respite from physical exhaustion” (15). They just wanted to rest for a while or even try to sleep, but that is something they could rarely do.

In the poem, Owen then famously displays one of the most gruesome scenes a man can witness:

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling

Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,

But someone still was yelling out and stumbling

And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime.—

Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,

As under a green sea, I saw him drowning. (9-14)

They were attacked with gas and most of them managed to put their gas mask on time, but one of them did not. The narrator then focuses the attention on this one soldier, "flound'ring" to put his gas mask on, but at the end "drowning" in a "green sea". Owen is using words like "guttering," "choking," "drowning," and "gargling" to portray the agony as realistically as possible, but he is well aware that it is futile to try to imagine the anguish of this horrible death.

Another of Owen's famous poems is "Insensibility", which depicts the psychological effects the war had on the soldiers. He suggests that they had to become numb and cold-blooded just to survive: "Happy are men who yet before they are killed /Can let their veins run cold" (1-2). It was a state of mind they had to adopt to increase their chances of beating the enemy. Showing emotion meant weakness, and there was no room for weakness in the trenches. The two lines "And some cease feeling /Even themselves or for themselves" (12-13) indicate, that they stop caring about themselves, about whether they are going to die or not, but also become unable to feel at all or to come to terms with what they are feeling, and this should give them strength to continue fighting. Owen also claims that "Happy are these who lose imagination" (19), because imagination can also get a man killed, and it can make him miserable in his present situation. There is no fantasy or something unrealistic about war. It is the truest and most undeniable part of their lives, and no emotion nor imagination can change that. This is the long-term effect from which the soldiers suffered after the war. Without any feelings, there is small chance they could ever maintain a relationship or create a new one.

Owen also portrays soldiers as expendable, easy to replace, with the lines "But they are troops who fade, not flowers, /For poets' tearful fooling: /Men, gaps for filling:" (7-9). The people who sent them to war view them as such, and Eagleton describes this perfectly: "The final phrase of the verse – 'but no one bothers' – contrasts the unavoidable anaesthesia of those plunged in the thick of warfare with the rather more culpable insensitivity of those kicking their heels comfortably at home, not least perhaps the politicians who sent the soldiers there. Insensibility applies to both

groups, but for quite different reasons" (133). The politicians do not care if the soldiers lose their lives in the battle, and as already portrayed by Owen, neither do the soldiers themselves. The one group is safe at home, insensible to what is happening to millions of young men across the world, while the other group had to desensitize themselves to such an extent, that they lost all feelings and imagination in the process, just to survive.

2.2. Isaac Rosenberg

Born in Bristol, Isaac Rosenberg is one of the lesser-known English war poets. He was raised in a rather large Jewish family of eight, and he was the only one who remained a private throughout the war, never achieving higher ranks like Sassoon and Owen. This is what makes his literary contribution specific as he writes from the perspective of a common private. Regardless of his military rank, "Rosenberg is distinguished by the nature of his poetic talent" (Bloom 64). According to Bloom, he attended the Slade School of Fine Art, refining himself into a moderately successful artist. His oldest sister encouraged him to start writing poetry in 1912, thus introducing a new name to the ferally large roster of World War I poets. He enlisted in 1915, not because he loved his country or to fight in the Great war, but to end the war as quickly as possible: "I never joined the army from patriotic reasons. Nothing can justify war. I suppose we must fight to get the trouble over" (Bloom 63). It is believed that he was mocked and discriminated against because of his Jewish descent, thus making him despise the war even more so: "'Believe me,' he wrote, 'the army is the most detestable invention on earth, and nobody but a private knows what it is to be a slave'" (Bloom 63). Unlike Sassoon or Owen, who were officers in the war and had their own men to take care of and lead to victory, Rosenberg was not responsible for his fellow soldiers. Because of the twenty months he spent in the trenches, he gave up on painting and focused on writing. His style of writing and the way he developed his poetic competence was strangely different from the likes of Sassoon and Owen. Bloom explains:

> Most of his contemporaries had been formed in the Georgian mould, and had to adapt their basically conventional verse forms to sustain the weight of new experience; one sees this process very clearly in Sassoon. But Rosenberg, unburdened by this tradition, was from the beginning far more willing to experiment with poetic language. Unlike other poets whose poetic offerings is often seen as beginning and ending with the war, Rosenberg's poems of the war were a natural extension of the art he was making before he entered the trenches. (64)

Many English war poets exhibit Georgian characteristics, but he never adopted this tone. Rosenberg stuck to his own “experimental” style of writing, thus distinguishing himself from all others. In April 1918 he was shot and killed during the Somme retreat, sharing a fate similar to Wilfred Owen's.

Rosenberg wrote “Break of Day in the Trenches” during his deployment in 1916, portraying a somewhat quiet morning in the Great War. He begins with a rising sun, “the same old druid Time as ever” (2), a scene familiar to any soldier; because they have to be on high alert at any given time, all of them witnessed the sun coming up dozens of time. He then introduces the reader to a “queer sardonic rat” (4), a motif that serves as “a reminder of his own mortality” (Clausson 124). Continuing in this tone, a soldier picks a poppy and puts it behind his ear. While Owen depicts death and the process of dying in his poems, Rosenberg reminds the reader of how easy it is for a soldier to lose his life at any given point. Right from the start, he presents two symbols of death – a rat and a poppy. Where there are rats, there are also dead corpses that they feed off to survive. With an almost infinite supply of food, the rats are there to remind the living of how short their life can be. The poppy has more than one meaning, as a flower closely connected to death, and a display of the solders' carelessness:

> Poppies were thought to feed off the blood that had soaked into the earth, which turned their petals red. A short-lived flower, the poppy’s transience mirrors that of the soldier’s; even the careless moment when the soldier nonchalantly sticks a poppy behind his ear suggests how vulnerable the soldier, like the poppy, is. The poppy’s connection with the dead will again be alluded to in the striking image at the end of the poem—“Poppies whose roots are in man’s veins.” (Bloom 74)

The rest of the poem is more violent; the enemy troops attack the trench, and a soldier loses his life, as foretold by the poppy motif, because of his momentary unawareness. In the second half, the word “torn” (18) stands out as a symbol as well, depicting how fleeting a human life can be. The soldier, same as the poppy, was torn from the earth, never to return. Rosenberg comes back to this idea one more time in the last line of the poem, with “dust” being the focal point: “But mine in my ear is safe— /Just a little white with the dust” (25-26). He intentionally uses the determiner “the” in the line, suggesting it is something more than the dust found near a trench. He refers to the dust that all human beings will become one day when they pass away, solidifying the mortality of a soldier as the main theme of the poem.

To continue, “Dead Man’s Dump” was described by critics as “Rosenberg’s finest war poem and one of the most compete crystallizations of the war experience” (Bloom 84). The theme of the poem is similar to “Break of Day in the Trenches”, that is commenting on the fleeting nature of the lives of soldiers which can end in an instance. Here, the solders are already dead, paving the road for the running ammunition carriages:

The wheels lurched over sprawled dead

But pained them not, though their bones crunched,

Their shut mouths made no moan.

They lie there huddled, friend and foeman,

Man born of man, and born of woman, (7-11)

They are corpses that no longer serve any purpose in the war, but Rosenberg humanizes them, no matter on which side they fight, by saying they are all born equal. They are no less human in death than they were in life. In the line “Now she has them at last!” (17) the word “she” refers to Earth, which turns it into a sort of a mother figure waiting for the soldiers to come home. They are all Earth’s children, which further underlines the absurdity of war and illustrates the idea that when people kill each other, a brother is killing a brother.

In the seventh stanza Rosenberg describes how a soldier perceives war and all the dangers that lurk within:

The air is loud with death,

The dark air spurts with fire,

The explosions ceaseless are.

Timelessly now, some minutes past,

Those dead strode time with vigorous life,

Till the shrapnel called ‘An end!’ (38-44)

Everything poses as a threat to them, even the air they are breathing. With never-ending explosions, the air filled with poisonous gas, and shrapnel from grenades flying around, it is a real hell on earth.

2.3. Siegfried Sassoon

Siegfried Sassoon was a competent soldier, appointed Commander of the Order of the British Empire, and a famous World War I poet who wrote against war. Being one of the well-known names in English war poetry, he was always described as an anti-war poet. His fellow poets loathed the war as well, but because of his angry and satirical poems directed at generals and politicians, he earned himself the paradoxical title of an anti-war soldier. Like Rosenberg, he was born into a Jewish family and started writing even before the Great War. However, his early work – along with the work he has done after the war – was less successful. Although it did receive some critical acclaim, this did not even come close to the work he had written from 1916 to 1920; in other words, his best work was written during the war.

He enlisted in 1915 and immediately showed off his extreme talent in warfare. After getting shot, he was sent back home to recover, and ended up writing an open letter of protest aimed at the generals and politicians: "I believe that this War is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it" (Bloom 43). He should have been court-martialled, but his friend Robert Graves intervened and sent him off to a hospital, convincing everyone that Sassoon suffered from shellshock. It was the same hospital where Wilfred Owen was recovering from the same illness and where they spent a lot of time together. He went back to the front in 1918 and fought there until one of his sergeants shot him in the head, mistaking him for a German soldier. Sassoon survived and continued writing even after the war. The general reaction to his anti-war poems was rather negative. He was being criticised for either not being patriotic enough or for being too realistic and violent. Winston Churchill was one of the few who actually liked Sassoon's poetry. He thought "the poems would bring home to the civilian population what the troops at the Front had to endure" (Bloom 43). In 1957 Sassoon converted to Catholicism, making almost all of his later work about religion and church. He died in 1967 in his sleep.

Sassoon's "The Rear-Guard" portrays a soldier going through a network of tunnels dug near the French town of Arras. The narrator of the poem is the sole character in it, making the atmosphere of the poem lonely and scary at the same time. It starts by depicting a lost soldier trying to make his way through the tunnels and towards the surface, where there is ongoing battle. The narrator starts to describe the tunnel, saying it is filled with "Tins, boxes, bottles, shapes too vague to know, /A mirror smashed, the mattress from a bed;" (4-5). These are the kind of conditions the soldiers had to endure for weeks at a time. Trash laying around, "unwholesome air" (3) and broken beds, it is a wonder anybody got a good night's sleep in this kind of a place. In the second stanza right at the beginning, the soldier trips over something and grabs a wall to keep his

balance. It is dark and wet in the tunnel, meaning he could not rely on all of his senses to find his way out. The soldiers were almost always exhausted, nearly deaf from all the gunshots and explosions, and in this case the soldier is also blind because of the never-ending darkness in the tunnels. Touch is the only sense he can rely on right now. Even his own mind is not reliable, seeing as the soldier tries to converse with a dead man:

> Humped at his feet, half-hidden by a rug,
>
> And stooped to give the sleeper's arm a tug.
>
> "I'm looking for headquarters." No reply.
>
> "God blast your neck!" (For days he'd had no sleep.)
>
> "Get up and guide me through this stinking place." (9-13)

He did not even check if the person was alive before starting the conversation, which is surprising considering the fact that death was all around them and it represented the only certainty in their lives. Perhaps it was the loneliness of the solder talking, trying to get any kind of response from the "sleeper". Later on, in the same stanza the narrator describes that the "eyes yet wore /Agony dying hard ten days before" (16-17), meaning the pain and suffering of the fallen soldier is still visible on his face after who knows how long. At the end of the poem the soldier escapes the tunnels, which Sassoon compares with hell in the last line.

"Conscripts" displays the period of conscription, which is not often depicted in war poetry. A drill-sergeant is preparing the new recruits for the fight. He mocks the "luminous rich colours" (3) of their clothing and intends to strip them of any social status they had in their civilian life. No matter whether they came from a poor or a rich family, they all had to wear "hueless khaki" (4). Here, Sassoon may be talking about himself, because he was one of the privileged ones in society:

> Here "Conscripts" offers an interesting glance into the class-distinctions within the army. In the early stages of the war, before heavy losses made it easier for soldiers to rise through the ranks, officers were picked from the privileged classes, of which Sassoon himself was a member. The theme of class awareness reappears in several of his poems, including "The March-Past," "In the Pink," "Base Details," and "The General." (Bloom 57)

In the second stanza Sassoon personifies "Love," "Rhyme," "Joy," "Wisdom," "Fancy," "Rapture," "Enchantment," and "Romance", presenting them as the conscripts which the drill-sergeant is trying to teach. All these ideals do not belong on the battlefield, which is why Sassoon

is portraying them as useless and hopeless recruits that gnaw their fingers or have sore feet and want to fall. He influenced Owen with the same idea, prompting him to write "Insensibility", where soldiers must become numb to survive the war. In the third stanza, Sassoon comments the drill-sergeant with the line "I gave them lectures on Defence, Attack;" (13), mocking and accusing him at once because he failed to prepare the recruits adequately. He also shows the recruits being bored by the drill-sergeant and falling asleep, but that is commentary directed at the newly-enlisted recruits and their lack of awareness of what they are getting themselves into, not the drill-sergeant per se. Sassoon was offered a position as an instructor for new recruits but refused. His friend Lady Ottoline explained the reason why: "How could he possibly train others to go out there knowing what they would have to go through. 'They will all be killed or maimed'" (Bloom 57).

2.4. Rupert Brooke

Rupert Brooke is "one of the most visible and well known of the Georgian poets" (Magella 4) in World War I poetry. He is different from other war poets because his "premature death fundamentally separates his poetry from that of later Georgian soldier-poets" (Magella 4), so even though he wrote about war, he never really experienced it. That is clearly shown in his poetry, especially when he praises the war and the soldiers that live and die for their country. This is the perspective of a man that had never taken another man's life; a man that never had to spend a day in a hellish trench. Brooke was not a lower-class citizen like most of the soldiers at that time, his friends "were either well-off middle class public school and university boys or their sympathetic and equally affluent female relations" (Magella 6). He attended a prestigious boarding school and got into Cambridge in 1906. After college he went on to travel the world for more than three years, gathering inspiration for his work. He enlisted because he thought that the war would provide "a solution to their troubles…not the end of their hopes, but a chance to renew them" (Delaney 17). Formally, he did take part in the war as he was stationed in 1914 in Belgium, but this was nothing compared to what Sassoon and Owen witnessed in action. During his brief deployment he wrote his best-known work to date: the five war sonnets titled "1914". In 1915 he died from blood poisoning while sailing in the Aegean Sea. His work was highly praised right up until other war poets, like Sassoon and Rosenberg, started writing and revealing the true nature of warfare in their poems. After that, he would often be criticised for his romantic and unrealistic depiction of war. According to some historians and authors, he would be better described as a pre-war poet, someone who told the story of all the young men that were eager to join the fight and bring glory to their nation, without realizing what it is like to actually be in a WW1 trench.

“The Soldier”, Brooke’s most famous poem, was often criticized for its unrealistic depiction of war and soldiers. Owen wrote about gruesome death and soldiers dying, Rosenberg about the futility of human life, Sassoon about loneliness, and Brooke about none of that; he wrote about patriotism and glory of war, depicting the soldier as a noble being. One must witness horrific things to actually write about them in the way that other war poets did. He was a very talented poet, but he wrote radically different from the other war poets.

To illustrate, “The Soldier” is a poem narrated in the first person and it seems to be about him, that is the soldier's voice is Brooke's voice. Even more specifically, Brooke does not talk about a specific, actual event, but about how he imagines a soldier should think and what he should believe, which is rarely seen in this type of poetry. Most of the other poets retell stories from their lives, but never really add themselves as a character in the story. In the first three lines he over-romanticizes his possible 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.” (1-3). The motif of “England” is reoccurring throughout the poem, denoting some sort of a higher meaning than just a country. England takes on the role of a mother figure that sends her children to protect her from evil and waits for them to come back.

In the sonnet, Brooke speaks of death as something noble, a possible outcome that the soldier should not fear, but embrace. If a soldier sacrifices himself for his country, his heart would be purified, “all evil shed away,” (9). He would become dust and once more connect himself with nature. In the last three lines, he describes a sort of heaven, where the brave soldiers will end up after death: “Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day; /And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness, /In hearts at peace, under an English heaven” (12-14). Being someone who never saw war for what it really was, he described it as positive and as patriotic as possible, but also something very abstract in comparison to the visceral descriptions available in the poems mentioned in earlier chapters of this paper. Moreover, the fact that he used the form of a sonnet testifies to the fact that he really wanted to glorify soldiers and war as noble people participating in a noble quest. His literary approach to the subject is traditional as is his view of war. To him, war is an abstraction, and he cannot really imagine (nor represent) what it is like to die slowly, to watch someone be blown to pieces by a bomb or to sit in a muddy trench for days.

Consequently, even though Brooke titled one of his sonnets “The Dead”, he still manages to romanticise the idea of death to such an extent, that it sounds like something a man would want to experience. His description of death and all the elegant words he uses seem to be naïve. In fact,

the difference between him and other war poets has never been so obvious, as it is in “The Dead”. Once again, as in “The Soldier”, in “The Dead” he is glorifying the sacrifice that the young men made for the rest of the world, and there is nothing wrong with portraying the dead soldiers as heroes, but his way of describing death and sacrifice could send a mixed message to young men joining the war. Brooke makes war seem almost like a military parade where everyone cheers the soldiers on. Conversely to this, when they join, they should be prepared for what is waiting for them on the battlefield, and poets like Rosenberg, Sassoon, and Owen manage to do exactly that. This is important both psychologically – so that a soldier remains strong in the face of terrible events, and tactically – so that a soldier remains concentrated on the task, and is able to perform his duty under extreme pressure. If a person reads Owen’s “Dulce et Decorum Est” and still wants to go to war, then s/he is truly ready. If someone is influenced by Brooke’s ideology and joins the war because of it, it will very likely end tragically. His soldier is no real soldier, and neither was he.

Conclusion

World War I poetry is a phenomenon that cannot and will not be repeated. These poets went through something that most people cannot even fathom, thus making it so unique. All of them partook in the same war and fought for the same country, and same ideals, yet every single one of them portrayed a different perspective of a soldier, or a whole new soldier character in general. Wilfred Owen explicitly writes about how gruesome and painful death can be, showing a soldier choking to death because of poisonous gas. Isaac Rosenberg shows the readers the vulnerable mortality of those men. A rat, a poppy, even mud found on the bottom of trenches can be one's worst enemy. No one is safe out there, be it day or night, warm or cold, peaceful or in the line of fire. Siegfried Sassoon comments on the authorities that have sent these young men to die, and also about how loneliness destroys their sanity. After the hell they have lived through, barely any one of them remained completely sane. The soldiers in their poems are men of flesh and blood; people who are vulnerable to bullets, abuse, and loneliness. Rupert Brooke, on the other hand, portrays the soldier differently. As a non-combatant, he only described an imagined, idealistic version of a soldier. The soldier is for Brooke an abstract hero. To conclude, the Great War destroyed so much and killed so many, but it also inspired a new kind of poetry which, thanks to the voices of WW1 poets, is never to be forgotten. Based on their personal experiences, WW1 poets described and wrote about soldiers making them human and nearer to us than was ever before imagined.

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