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**Usage of Elements of the Early War 'Lie' in Sassoon's Late
War Poetry
BA thesis**

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Abstract

The First World War's themes and topics are still topical in the light of modern conflicts in the world, as the concerns of the people who participated in the first world war have resurfaced again for example in Ukraine where very similar kind of trench warfare is going on. This thesis takes a look at the cultural influences at the start of the 20th century that coloured the way Siegfried Sassoon looked at his experiences at the Western Front and at the home front and how he arrived at his feeling of disillusionment and the reflection of this disillusionment in his war poetry.

The thesis first looks at how the ideas concerning war were shaped by the Victorian chivalric revival of the 19th century that led to two million men volunteering in 1914-1916, the influence of war propaganda on the soldiers themselves and the home front which led to Siegfried Sassoon's revaluing of his wartime experience in his poetry of 1916-1918. The thesis consists of two chapters. The literature review which is divided into three parts looks at society at the start of the 20th century and Sassoon's upbringing, the start of the first world war in 1914 and Sassoon's eager enlistment and from 1916 onwards his "Wilful Defiance of Military Authority". The second chapter examines closely a selection of Sassoon's war poems using the method of close reading in order to highlight how Sassoon uses the elements of early war propaganda in his antiwar messaging. The paper ends with a conclusion and the Resume in Estonian.

Keywords: Siegfried Sassoon, poetry, propaganda, First World War

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Introduction

My choice of topic for the thesis was influenced by a few different factors of my own interests in history, especially the history of the First World War. Although the latter has been a very thoroughly researched topic, its sheer magnitude and influence on British culture can be felt to this day and thus it is worth revisiting now, more than a century later, especially in the light of reemerging modern conflicts which bear a striking resemblance to the trench warfare at the western front.

A literature course introduced me to the soldier poets of the First World War and Wilfred Owen's poem "Dulce et Decorum Est" caught my attention due to the contrast between its emotional and bleak beginning and the usage of Horace's quote to achieve an opposite meaning. With more research into the topic, I eventually arrived at Siegfried Sassoon, his influence on Owen's work, and the interesting development of his character and works. I eventually arrived at Siegfried Sassoon's poetry through the influence of his fellow poets Owens work and became interested in the precise moment when his change of sentiment occurred which led to his very disillusioned poetry of the later stage of the war. Due to the peculiar layered nature of British First World War poetry in general and Sassoon's poetry in particular, it is imperative to have a grasp of the culture surrounding his upbringing and war experiences to better understand his mindset. To achieve this, I have consulted a variety of materials: the authoritative analysis of the generation of 1914, the impact of trench warfare on those who participated in it, the voices of the home front which were so drastically different to the lived experience in the trenches, the carefully worded war propaganda to bring people to volunteer and alter enlist in the army and then the disillusioned voices of those who saw through the official lies.

I have divided the theoretical section into three parts covering three different time periods. The first period covers the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, and my interest here centered on the cultural upbringing of the generation of 1914 who ended up fighting in the trenches. The second period covers the start of the war, the enthusiastic public response to it, as well as the government propaganda to keep up this enthusiasm. The third time period covers the “breaking point” of 1916 that was caused by the defeats at the battle of the Somme and Passchendaele and literary responses to it, aggravated by the well-meaning ignorance of the civilians at home which contributed to the general disillusion of the soldiers at the front.

With this background knowledge I then proceeded to look at Sassoon’s poetry in order to demonstrate how he uses the official war propaganda that was very positive in tone to achieve the effect that would overturn the original message so that a completely opposite meaning is achieved. The short selection of poems was specially chosen from a much larger corpus of Sassoon’s poems to highlight especially the bitter irony this juxtaposition between the ideal and reality reveals. The poetry analysis (which is based on David Greenham’s ideas on close reading) is split in two based on whether the poetry is taking place at the home front or at the trenches as there is a noticeable difference in how the propaganda is used in those works.

1. Chapter One: The Background to Siegfried Sassoon’s Varied Responses to the War

The Great war at the start of the 20th century had a profound impact on the cultures of all the participating nations. This chapter examines how pre-war British societal ideals, influenced by colonial propaganda, and chivalric narratives shaped early wartime patriotism in the young men who would end up fighting the war, and the disillusionment that would come with it. This context

is necessary in order to understand both why Sassoon would change his views on the war, as well as the references to early war propaganda that are present in his poetry.

Despite the amount of research that has been conducted upon these topics; Sassoon's poetry and how he achieves his message is worth revisiting. To understand how and why Sassoon arrived at his views, it is imperative to understand what the society was like for a young man like him at the start of the 20th century, how the war was initially perceived and what the early literary response to it was, how in 1916 disillusionment set in and the poetic response to war became embittered. Sassoon is especially interesting in this respect because being an upper middle-class man he very characteristically for his generation embraced the aristocratic ideal of selfless service which became tarnished and largely invalidated by the end of the war. His disillusionment thus is representative of both the aristocratic youth and the middle-class one.

1.1 Society at the Start of the 20th Century and Sassoon's Upbringing

The beginning of the 20th century is an important period to look at, as it is the time during which most of the men who would end up fighting in the war grew up in. The ideals and upbringing of the time would go on to largely shape the initial response to the war and are thus to be considered in the context of what was to come.

Sassoon's upbringing is reflective of many other would-be officers of the first world war. In Cristina Pividori's (2025:61) words, Sassoon "embodied the lifestyle of a traditional English gentleman". Both Pividori (2025:61) and Robert Wohl (1979:96) speak of Sassoon's childhood in the Kent countryside, enjoying a comfortable upbringing in relative wealth and spending his leisure time on activities such as foxhunting, cricket and golf. However, while Pividori (2025:61) only passingly mentions Sassoon writing verse, then Wohl (1979:96) calls it one of his earliest passions

next to music and country sports, pointing out how Sassoon produced his first volume of poems at the age of 11. His country life is also the focus of his semi-autobiographical novel *Memoirs of Fox-hunting Man* (published in 1928). Sassoon's upbringing was thus that of a wealthy but in some ways quite an average and even unremarkable upper middle-class youth. The question arises what would compel someone like Sassoon to volunteer at the start of the war.

An important part of boys' upbringing of the time was played by religion and the associated ideals. Both Paul Fussell (2000:21) and David Roberts (2005:19-20) mention the Christian ideals of self-sacrifice ingrained in the youths from school as well as ideals of heroism. Additionally, Roberts (2005:19-20) claims that the idea of a heroic death was linked to feeling of brotherhood cultivated by the public schools and the concomitant slogan "play the game", both of which were the result of the cult of school games. Roberts (2000: 21) also mentions how such abstract ideas as honour or glory were a staple for those raised on heroic tales and Arthurian poems. Pividori (2025:61) shows via *Memoirs of Fox-hunting Man* that Sassoon also saw himself as a heroic figure. Although the *Memoirs* were written in retrospect and are not a completely accurate reflection of Sassoon's own life, the book still is a good reflection of Sassoon's own views.

In addition to those ideals, it is also important to note how society at the time saw warfare in general. Roberts (2005:18) claims that for the war to even be possible, the government had to be sure of its population's support in the event of a conflict. This certainty was largely determined by the distance and relative success of the little colonial wars so far and the enthusiastic popular press that influenced the public's view of British military might (Roberts 2005:19-20). It is easy to see how a sense of false confidence could arise with the lack of near-peer conflict experiences, especially with the propaganda of the colonial victories. It is also not a far-fetched assumption that Sassoon as a well-educated young man would be at least somewhat well versed in the ongoings of the British colonial expeditions and his view of conflicts would be further influenced by that. This

overconfidence would be further bolstered by another factor. In contrast to Roberts' claims of imperial military confidence, Fussell (2000:21) quotes A. J. P. Taylor who points out that "[t]here had been no war between the Great Powers since 1871. No man in the prime of life knew what war was like". A lack of memory and experience of what the horrors of true war could be like was prevalent in society, while confidence in their own prowess in such a would be conflict was very high. This to some extent can also explain the naivety with what the war would be greeted in 1914.

Indeed, without knowing what would happen later in the war, the decade before the outbreak of the First World War would seem almost idyllic to an educated young British man. Wohl (1979:86) in his book *The Generation of 1914* has discussed at length the nature of the "lost generation" and the true scope and tragedy what was lost, how that generation was raised as "[s]trong, brave and beautiful" and how "they combined athletic prowess with deep classical learning." This generation was further defined by the disillusioning experience of war they shared. Everything Wohl says about the lost generation also applies to Sassoon. Sassoon shares with his generation the following characteristics: the idealistic upbringing rooted in chivalry, the country house upbringing with an emphasis on country sports and the sporting spirit, classical learning and literary interests that would reflect this, the early enthusiastic response to the war and immediate volunteering for the front and performance as a model soldier, but also the psychological trauma as the result of fighting at the front line, the period of convalescence, the reappraisal of the war, the violent reaction against the propaganda and the resultant embittered poetry.

At the end of the 19th and at the start of the 20th century there was clearly a strong societal pressure towards certain ideals. The ideals that in the event of a conflict would not only compel young men to fight and die for their country. They would be expected to do so in a cheerful and sporting manner suitable for a British officer and gentleman. The successes of colonial skirmishes would give a flawed understanding of warfare to the younger generation who had no inkling of the

true horrors of warfare and would not know what to expect from the new industrialized war of attrition as opposed to the glory of old cavalry charges. Youths such as Sassoon would confidently expect that when called into action it would be for a just and noble cause, and they would see themselves as the heroes in a story in which personal skill and prowess would determine the outcome.

1.2. Sassoon And the Early Part of the War, 1914-1916.

This chapter will focus on the early public and literary response to the outbreak of war in Britain, the early representation of the opposing sides from the British point of view and how the public perception was shaped by propaganda and famous authors. It will also look at how voices that might have reasoned against the war, such as George Bernard Shaw, were not taken seriously.

Although with hindsight the war seems inevitable, it is interesting to note to what extent it was not expected at the time. Niall Ferguson (2008:122-125) has shown that although the narratives presented in retrospect seem to tell of the conflict's inevitability, it was not apparent to the contemporaries. He supports his claim that the war was unexpected by looking at the economic market, using Rothschild as an example that even the largest and most well-connected investors were caught by surprise. He demonstrates that even such influential and well-informed people like the banking family of Rothschilds were caught by surprise. Although wargames had been played at the headquarters of both sides, nobody really expected the war to materialize.

Once the conflict started, everybody embraced it enthusiastically and there was general public rejoicing in the streets. Sassoon's experiences and reactions are reflective of the general trend. While Lord Kitchener asked for a hundred thousand volunteers for what was advertised as both the greatest war in history as well as one that would be over by Christmas, he received close

to two million recruits instead (Roberts 2005:48). Clearly public opinion of what Britain's role in the conflict should be was one of active participation. And the young men, like Sassoon, who were supposed to fight it were more than eager to sign up. Indeed, Sassoon volunteered for the military service on the 1st of August 1914 (Wohl 1979:96, Roberts 2005:81). His reasons for it are not fully known, but some can be gleaned from different sources. Both Wohl (1979:96) and Roberts (2005:81) agree that at least partly it was due to the societal pressure and expectations. Sassoon's eager enlistment is indicative of the previously mentioned Christian self-sacrifice, colonial hubris, and a romanticized view of conflict which would compel the young men to go and prove their worth. However, Roberts also hints at Sassoon's money troubles as a possible reason as well as the forced selling of his beloved horse to the army as additional factors in his decision to enlist (Roberts 2005:81). Although it might seem trivial in the modern world, for a self-proclaimed fox hunting man, the loss of his horse would bring great heartache. Enlistment as a way to deal with emotional turmoil was not uncommon among the war poets either. Roberts (2005:89-90) shows that for instance Edward Thomas, who seemed to have struggled with thoughts of suicide, as well as with having financial worries, eventually enlisted, and described that enlistment as a natural culmination of his life, finally being at ease by letting fate decide his survival. These extreme actions could be tied to the Christian ideals, as something like suicide is a mortal sin thus a choice to join the war would alleviate the guilt while also providing an opportunity to escape the inner troubles.

Even considering various reasons for enlistment, it cannot be overstated how much of a false idea the society at large had of the war. In Britain the war was at first seen by certain circles almost as a blessing. Kate Kennedy and Trudi Tate (2011:3) for example show that some people saw the outbreak of war as helping to overcome the unduly great German influence in classical music in favour of the true vernacular British music. Eksteins (2000:60-63) shows that in Germany campaigners for homosexual and women's rights and even German Jews supported the war as

favouring the various causes. David Cannadine (1996:73-74) has spoken of the feverish excitement the upper classes to join the war in order to prove to the society at large that their education and social position would finally be justified by exercising their leadership in war. It can be surmised that different layers of society welcomed the conflict as an occasion to prove their own worth.

The written word had an immense effect on the perception of war from its very start. An example of this would be the early war propaganda. The German invasion of France through Belgium was presented to the reading public as an injustice, and the claim of “might cannot be right” was repeated in the public press (Roberts 2005:35). This has a tinge of irony to it when the British own colonial expansion very much followed that maxim that “might is right”. Media was used to spread war readiness, chivalric ideas and to spur on young men to fight for a just cause to the extent that even those with most pacifistic beliefs could not stay out of the fighting brotherhood, willing to not only die but also to kill for their country (Roberts 2005:9-12). This propaganda was the main driving force for recruitment (Angelis 2016:74). The British government tasked influential writers to employ their skills for the good of the nation, the Propaganda Bureau was created, employing such authors as H.G. Wells and Rudyard Kipling, with George Bernard Shaw not being included due to his more independent views (Roberts 2005:54). These authors used the imagery and language that was familiar to their audience. Sporting analogues were a good way to present the conflict in a familiar, upper-class sportsmanlike manner as yet another game like cricket or football (Fussell 2000:9). Yet, as Nayef A. Al-Joulan (2011:110) has shown, the First World War was greeted by all layers of society equally enthusiastically. Even if the propaganda had upper-class tones and used upper-class sentiments, the overall mood was still one of cheerful acceptance. However, the response to the war was not completely homogeneous. George Bernard Shaw, for one, offered criticism of the war, but did not have a platform to express his ideas, as even liberal newspapers refused to publish him in the name of national unity (Roberts, 2005:13-14). This kind

of negative response to the war was very much that of the minority opinion, mostly kept from the public and thus it would be that much more of a shock when it would surface later on. When the severity of the war became clearer, Well's well-known slogan 'The war to end all wars' became a popular sentiment justifying it as one last effort for eternal peace, Shaw's response was more insightful when he said "... nobody is going to disarm after this nonsense" (Roberts 2005:59). The scale and cost of the war was starting to be realized after the first casualties in the battlefield, but thanks to propaganda efforts throughout the war the sacrifices were ultimately necessary for the just cause.

Like many others Sassoon at the beginning of the war would feel quite content for having enlisted. Wohl (1979:96-97) especially emphasizes how his training in 1914 would feel like a continuation of his country life days. Due to a riding accident and a number of small incidents as well as his additional training to become an officer, kept Sassoon from the front until November of 1915 so that he would take part in combat only in 1916(Wohl 1979:97). In combat he would prove an exemplary soldier testified by his Military Cross both Roberts (2005:299) and Wohl (1979:97) speak about his heroic and fierce recklessness in combat. This is also supported by a quote from Robert Graves where he claims that the amount of Germans he has killed is not even comparable to Sassoon's "wholesale slaughter" (Roberts 2005:132). Clearly Sassoon was not one to back down in the heat of the battle and would very much live up to the ideals that the British officer was supposed to embody.

1.3 From 1916 Onwards: Wilful Defiance of Military Authority

While the first war years did not go exactly as promised and planned by headquarters on both sides, it was the failures in the field in 1916 that truly changed how the conflict was perceived by the

soldiers. A feeling of hopelessness would spread among the troops on the front lines as the war seemed to drag on and society at large seemed not to care for what happened to the soldiers who were doing the fighting.

In 1916 Sassoon was sent back home with trench fever and it is during that enforced leisure time when he was forced to interact with his family and had the time to read the newspapers, he would start to reconsider his attitude towards the war which would also be reflected in his poetry (Wohl 1979:97-98). This reconsidering process culminated in Sassoon's letter of protest "Wilful Defiance of Military Authority" which found its way into newspapers and was read out in parliament to a stunned response from the public. Both Wohl (1979:99) and Roberts (2005:299) stress Sassoon being a decorated soldier which would lend particular weight to his protest as it could not be interpreted as an act of cowardice. As his protest could not be viewed by the public as an act of an entirely sane man he it was safe to diagnose him as suffering from shellshock which necessitated him being sent to Craiglockhart Mental Hospital to regain his mental balance, for no normal soldier was supposed to harbour such outrageous notions as he exhibited in his letter of protest (Roberts 2005:299). It is noteworthy that Sassoon's critical style would only emerge after his leave to England and it was probably caused by having to perceive the dissonance between his experiences in the trenches and the civilian lack of knowledge of what really happened at the front which was caused by the still optimistic war propaganda.

This development was at least partly influenced by governmental censorship. Sassoon was dismayed by the attitudes that were expressed back at home. The long dragged out and ultimately failed Somme offensive discussed by Fussel (2000:12-14), Wohl (1979:94) and Roberts (2005:265) had led to enormous casualties and a bitterness in the troops. Although media censorship made sure that even such terrible losses would be downplayed. Roberts (2005:220) brings as an example the newspaper *The Times* which seem to have existed as if in an alternative

reality when it claimed that the British fire had been destructive and accurate and a large proportion of injuries suffered by the British soldiers had been slight wounds, neither of which was true. Eksteins (2000:229) in particular speaks of soldier's struggles to voice their experiences while on leave, as well as their hatred of journalists and armchair strategists and of the painful naivety of letters from home asking them to try not to get wounded and saying that they were having a hard time too.

This anguish was further exasperated by the attitude projected by high command. As expressed by Roberts, (2005:158-159) while admitting that while losses, death and suffering are to be expected in a war, writes that seemingly for Haig „safeguarding of the lives of as many of his men as possible seems never to have been one of his concerns.“ This idea is further supported by an excerpt Haig's diary when he writes after the failed offensive that considering the scale of the operation 40,000 casualties could not be considered severe (Roberts 2005:265) A bleak image emerges here for the frontline soldier. As Wohl puts it, "... the dream of innocent victory died. So did faith in the wisdom of the General Staff" (1979:94). This loss of faith would not only be expressed in Sassoon's protest letter, but also in his poetry. His poem "The General" seems to be almost a direct response to failures of the army headquarters, while also inspired by Sassoon's own experiences in Arras which are directly referenced in the poem.

In any case the mass of casualties was such that despite the government censorship cracks started to appear in the public morale. Kennedy and Tate (2011:3) present an opinion from 1916 doubting if there would be any recovering from that level of bloodshed at all and whether music as an art form would ever recover. This is in a very stark contrast with early war celebrations of being free from the German cultural influence. Wohl shows that as a result of the Somme and similar offensives the huge casualties among volunteers' conscription became necessary and the nature of trench warfare changed as a result in 1916 the idea of war as a chivalric endeavour had died together

with the initial volunteers (1979:94-95). Roberts stresses the scale of the war effort, its impersonality and the inhumanity of the new weapons (gas and artillery). Fergusson (2008:156-160) stresses the new brutality at the front, war propaganda having dehumanized the enemy which is born by instances when enemy prisoners got “accidentally lost” (were killed) on the way back. Conscripted especially would have had a strong impact on morale back at home, as participation in the war could not be seen as a choice any more. The idealist volunteers were replaced by unwilling conscripts, who would in turn receive bleak recounts from the veterans after these massacres which would further erode their morale.

The men who were promised a quick adventure in 1914 would find themselves trapped more than two years later. A response to these inescapable horrors would at least in part be humour. Satirising the feeling of “Endless war” as Fussell (2000:72-73) puts it: Soldiers would joke about the duration of deployment (“How long are you on the front for? Seven years. Lucky I’m for the whole duration”) or entertainment sketches imagining the trenches in the 1950s mere yards apart. A level of dark humour and irony emerged that was new and a direct response to the experiences of the war. Eksteins also speaks of how the men stuck in the horrors of the trenches would find solace in black humour with a grim example of a hand sticking out from the sandbags in the wall of a trench that would be greeted whenever one arrived or left the frontlines with a “Tata, Jack” and “ ‘ello Jack” (2000:151). Similarly to these examples Sassoon’s own poetry would also have a bleak but humorous undertone to soften the blow of the horrors described.

With these developments, after two long years of industrialized warfare the chivalric myth was well and truly dead with the failures of the Somme. While the home front was kept in the dark about the extent of the true horrors of trench warfare, the soldiers stuck in the front would have to find other ways to deal with it. Thus, the emergence of black humour and irony in response to the feelings of abandonment as well as (often justified) criticism and satire of those in power emerged.

Field Marshal Haig especially would be criticized for his wasting of British lives. The next chapter will analyse a selection of Sassoon's poems with a view to how all these concerns discussed above are reflected in Sassoon's poetry.

2. Chapter Two: The Clash of Propaganda and Reality in Sassoon's War Poems

This chapter will focus on the analysis of poems by Sassoon in the light of what was discussed above. The focus of the analysis will be on Sassoon's usage of early war propaganda concepts in his anti-war works. The Methodology for the analysis will be based upon David Greenham's (2019) ideas of close reading and the six contexts (semantic, syntactic, thematic, iterative, generic and adversarial) necessary for a better understanding of the poems meaning. The analysis of the poems aims at uncovering the various layered meanings which are necessarily coloured by the historical context and personal preferences.

From the six contexts presented by Greenham, generic context is especially worth mentioning as a common denominator among these poems, as all of them are from the same genre and there are some overarching similarities that will be also discussed separately. The generic context in Sassoon's case is the anti-war poetry of the First World War. This means that troops are shown as being human. Instead of them marching proudly they are shown as slumping through the mud, tired, irritated, hurt or dying. The deaths presented are not glorious as one would expect in heroic poems of the early war, but they are lonely deaths, in pain amongst the bottomless mud of the trenches. While the troops may still be brave, but heroism may no longer be there, as the troops do what they are told because they must, rather than perishing out of the goodness of their hearts.

The choice of poems is based on a number of criteria. Firstly, they must be poems by Sassoon, from the 2nd half of the conflict (1916 onwards). Secondly, they must focus on the war and be relatively short because they are more pointed. Thirdly, as the main question is “How Sassoon uses early war propaganda elements to achieve a reversed message?” and not “Does he do it?”, then poems that do not include those elements were not used. Based on those criteria, the following poems were selected: “They”, “The Hero”, “Memorial Tablet”, “The One-Legged Man”, “The general”, “Died of Wounds”, “Dreamers”. This list of poems is divided in two with the first four focusing on the mixed messages that are sent and received about the war at the home front while the rest are of soldiers experiencing the frontlines on their own. The poems are taken from Roberts’ anthology *Minds at War Poetry and Experiences of the First World War* (2005). The poems in full can also be found in the Appendix.

2.1 Poetry Taking Place Back at Home

These poems deal with the topic of presenting the horrors and results of war to people back home. In these cases, this presentation is achieved in one of two ways. Either a message of death of the soldier is presented to those left behind, or the soldiers themselves returning home are crippled by the war and thus the wars influences cannot be easily ignored.

“They” flips around the religious justification of the war and uses “the ways of god are strange” as its punchline. The poem is structured as a dialogue. The bishop expresses the opinion that the troops are not left unchanged for fighting for a righteous cause. The troops respond to this that they are indeed not left unchanged but then point out their horrific injuries. In the light of this amount of suffering the bishop’s answer “the ways of god are strange” feels incredibly distasteful and out of touch.

The bishop and the soldiers who he condescendingly and familiarly calls “the boys” seem to be talking to a third party, as “the bishop tells us”, but “the boys reply”, so we are the recipient in both cases. This puts the reader in an interesting position, as he/she can evaluate both sides’ claims. Early war propaganda that reimagined the Germans as godless pagans is used here, as the war is called a war against the Antichrist. The same applies to a “just cause” e.g. the defence of Belgium. The idea of “war to end all wars” is also present, as the bishop calls it the last attack. The soldiers’ answer (also interesting that they are called “the boys” which stresses their youth) lists their various and often lethal or crippling ailments. To all that the bishop’s only answer is “The ways of God are strange” to which the high-flown speech at the beginning of the poem is in stark contrast, as the man of God does not seem to have an actual answer.

The poem directly challenges the early war notions of a just and heroic war, one fought with Christian ideals and presented as the last great push needed for peace, while the soldiers who are forced to fight in that war show the lack of glamour and actual consequences suffered by these “boys” not even men. The last line being especially important as after the bishop is confronted with war realities, he has nothing to say.

“The Hero” gives an example of propaganda and communication between the home front and the frontlines, as well as societies’ expected reactions. A mother, when receiving the news of Her’s son’s death only asks if he was brave and died for the cause, rather than being angry at the war that killed her son. The soldier bringing her the message who happens to know her son and how he died a coward, feeds into the heroic myth and tells the mother that yes, her son died a heroic death. The last two lines of the first stanza show how deluded the people back home were and how the mothers were proud of their dead sons.

The second stanza has interesting word choices, the usage of “gallant lies” directly draws parallels to gallant knights. In this also both characters are fulfilling their societally expected roles.

The woman would believe these lies. Words that were used in early war poetry to describe the soldiers such as triumph are now used to describe the dead soldier's mother instead. In the final stanza the reader is exposed to the true extent of these "gallant lies". While the mother is grieving her heroic son, the officer is recollecting how Jack had been a useless coward begging to be sent back home. In early war poetry death was not uncommon, but it was presented as almost a glorious reward. Dying soldiers greeted death's embrace with grace and solidarity, as it signalled that their duty was done. Here, however, the soldier's death is presented as inconsequential and brutal. "Blown to small bits" contrasts with "no one seemed to care" highlighting how commonplace such brutal and disfiguring deaths were. The last stanza is in clear contrast with the rest of the poem, presenting two sides of the war and can be seen as a critique of the censorship, even if in this case it was self-imposed. Hiding the horrors of the war from the home front could also be seen as extending the war and thus the officer with his "gallant lies" would be directly making his own stay at the front longer and postpone his own death.

This poem gives a great overview of how deeply ingrained the propaganda was in society. How those affected by the brutality of war would be almost blind to it. The mother's reaction is not one of worry about how much her son had to suffer and endure but worry about whether he was courageous and heroic. The soldier delivering the message also feels pressured to lie and sooth the grieving mother's loss by playing along with these hopes and lies while being aware of the truth which further symbolizes the way soldiers were expected to put on a "brave face" in front of the civilians.

"Memorial Tablet" draws attention to how often the volunteers were not in fact that voluntary. It seems to present a dead soldier's thoughts during his own memorial service as he recounts how he got pressured into enlisting and how those who pressured him are now attending the service rather uncaringly.

The first stanza is largely focused on the societal pressures as the soldier does not seem to have volunteered but rather the “[s]quire nagged and bullied till I went to fight”. This shows the general attitude towards anyone who did not volunteer to fight at first. They were seen as cowardly or not patriotic and the constant nagging and pressure would eventually force them to enlist. His enlistment is forced by Lord Derby’s “schemes”. Lord Derby’s stance was that of a man who is quoted as saying that if he had 20 sons, he would be ashamed if not all of them joined the war (Cannadine 1996:73). The line “I died in hell” could have multiple connotations. There is a direct parallel to the biblical themes in early war poetry, as well as a possible lack of salvation from the horrors of the trenches. The soldier’s death is not glorious, as he is blown up by an artillery shell and sinks into the “bottomless mud”. This most likely means that the body was not recovered either. That notion is further enforced in the next verse where the Squire is only confronted with a gilded plaque upon which the soldier’s name is inscribed rather low down the list. It is notable that there seems to be no real grief for the dead soldier. The inscription ““In proud and glorious memory”” he says is his only due, a name among many others the soldier observes, while his spirit laments the suffering and time spent in France. That suffering is then juxtaposed with the very last line of the poem “What greater glory could a man desire?”. It is unclear whether that is the thought of the Squire or the Soldier. In the case of the Squire, it would be showing the lack of empathy or understanding people back at home had for the war, while in the case of the Soldier it would be more than likely be said in bitter irony.

This poem is especially important as it directly references the influence the landed gentry (Lord Derby) had on young men enlisting as well as mentioning the battlefield of Passchendaele which is another infamous area in France akin to the likes of Somme. It uses the names of familiar people and places and ties them to the horrors of war. On top of societal pressures, it is also

impactful in how the dead soldier seems to be trying to figure out if the supposed honors that the war bestowed upon him were really worth the suffering and death.

“The One-Legged Man” is quite different from all the previous ones as without the title it would seem almost idyllic at in the beginning Sassoon describes the autumnal countryside. The same patriotic beauty that was once used to compel men to fight is now greeting the returning soldier.

The parallels to early war propaganda are in both wording and structure: “How right it seemed that he should reach the span, Of comfortable years allowed to man!”. This echoes poetry where the imaginary soldiers felt right and proper at the front as if they were made for it. Although in the beginning it was mentioned that the soldier was propped up on a stick, without the title we would still not know what was wrong with him even as, “Safe with his wound, a citizen of life. He hobbled blithely through the garden gate”. It is only with the last line that we reach a kind of punchline, as the man seems to almost happily exclaim “/.../ ‘Thank God they had to amputate!’”. The last line forces the reader to reevaluate the whole poem, while also hinting at the horrors of the war. Not only because of the soldier’s leg being amputated but more so because he is thankful for it. Especially when we consider the context of the time when disability’s acceptance in society was not comparable to modern standards. The soldier seems cheerful and thankful for the amputation as it means he got away from the front line. It is especially poignant in retrospect as the soldier does not know how badly crippled soldiers would be treated after the war and would eventually perhaps even wish that he had not made it out at all.

Sassoon juxtaposes the idea of ones glorious fate being to die at the front to the glory of the soldier returning home instead, to the beauty of the English countryside. It doesn’t delve deeper into the struggles a returning soldier would face, the poem conveys very through the last line the shock which forces him/her to reconsider the beauty of the landscape described before.

In these poems one of the main ways war propaganda seems to have been used is to contrast and contradict the realities of war. Sassoon, by providing the context of what the soldiers went through at the front, forces the reader to choose an interpretation of the poems. Choosing between the literal and naïve interpretation and the one where the original meaning could be completely overturned. “The One-Legged Man” could thus be seen as a genuine celebration of a soldier who has returned to the picturesque English countryside to enjoy the reward for his effort or as a bitter irony on these same rewards.

2.2 Poetry Taking Place at the Front

These poems deal with the topic of soldiers at the front, their experiences, thoughts and feelings while forced to be stuck in the trenches or injured and awaiting some sort of relief. The war propaganda that had been used to get the men to enlist is now proven to be untrue, as the reality of the trenches is much bleaker.

“The General” is a poem critical of the high command’s wasting of soldiers’ lives, as well as shows how fast the mood and morale can change for a frontline soldier. While the poem is shorter than the others in our selection, its shortness also adds to its effect.

The poem starts with the General cheerfully greeting the soldiers going to the frontline. Straight rows of eager soldiers march past him but the reader gets a shock when in the third line he/she is told that “[n]ow the soldiers he smiled at are most of 'em dead”. It is not an exaggeration, as in assaults such as the Somme discussed in the previous chapter the sheer number of the dead was staggering. These losses would also have a noticeable impact on the soldiers morale and although the poem does not say how the soldiers regarded the high command before these losses, it gives a rather clear idea of what they think after it with “[a]nd we're cursing his staff for

incompetent swine”. Considering how important class structure was in the British army an argument could be made also for ideas of the soldiers rebellion against their upper class officers. In the light of Sassoon’s upbringings this seems unlikely though however the upper and lower classes while sharing the horror of the trenches together, grew extraordinarily close the young dashing officers were frequently idolized. Considering this the reference to the commanding officers as incompetent swine is very telling and expressive of the soldiers’ deep frustration. An extra layer is provided by treating the word ‘swine’ as a common curse. The soldiers were indeed forced to live like swines in the mud of the trenches, while the well-off high command far removed from the frontline in cozy headquarters could be seen as acting like true swines in respect to the soldiers lives. The poem also has a certain personal touch to it, as it seems to directly refer to Sassoon’s own deployment in Arras where the troops in the poem are also stationed. While the general and his staff are painted as incompetent before, then the final line seems to indicate a level of deliberation in the general’s actions. The line “But he did for them both by his plan of attack” Implies that the general may have been aware of the soldiers’ disgust for him and thus purposefully planned the attack in a way that would be most devastating for them as his personal revenge.

The poem illustrates well both the distance and the lack of humanity on the part of the high command from the regular soldier – the only occasion when the soldiers saw them was when they sent them to the frontline. The scale of casualties at the frontline comes across when we consider that the soldiers who had arrived at the frontline only a week before are already discounted as cannon fodder. This prospect of dying almost immediately explains well the feelings of resentment harbored by the surviving soldiers towards their betters

“Died of Wounds” is a poem about a soldier’s last night in a field hospital. He is delirious with a fever and seemingly hallucinating, as he is speaking to an unseen friend before succumbing to his injuries.

The soldier's cause of death seems to have been an attack on the German lines. The second stanza specifically mentions the command "It's time to go", while the wounded soldier also expresses his doubts "We'll never take it". The poem seems to be a criticism of the Somme offensive, as well as a response to the underreporting of the casualties by the war propaganda when the soldier's dead body would be called a *Slight Wound*. The capitalization of these words emphasizes that there should be a layer of extra meaning. Those exact words were used in The Times' excerpt quoted by Roberts (2005: 220) which offhandedly claimed that the Somme offensive could be seen as a successful operation, and its unimaginable casualties were referred to callously as "very slight wounds". In this case there is a sharp and grim contrast between the nightlong suffering of the soldier with "[h]is wet white face and miserable eyes" calling out to dead comrades. In addition to that reference, the soldier's death could also be seen as only a slight wound to the army as a whole by the high command, emphasizing even more the inhumane nature of the war where a death is seen as more like an inconvenience.

The poem has an extra layer of hopelessness to it due to the soldier's delirious mumblings complaining about the task of going over the top and what is expected of them in battle. The capitalized usage of *Slight Wound* sounds almost mocking when compared to not only the fact that the man had died but also that he had done so after a night of suffering, especially as in his death he is described as smiling, thus completing his transformation into his own opposite, from a gravely wounded delirious man to a smiling peaceful *Slight Wound*.

"Dreamers" is in its theme similar to more conventional and pro war poetry, as it presents soldiers waiting for battle, forced to face destiny while dreaming of home and its peaceful luxuries. However, there is an undertone of gloom that is which deepens in the second stanza when their fates are revealed.

The first stanza presents the soldiers waiting for battle, the description being not too dissimilar to how it would be in a propaganda piece, except for Sassoon's choice of words. The battlefield is called "death's grey land", the soldiers are not hopeful or excited but rather they are dealing with their "feuds, and jealousies, and sorrows.". This is a far cry from the knightly sentiments they were supposed to feel. While there is a sense of certainty in their actions, the battle they go to is not glorious but a "fatal climax" adding to that gloom. When the battle starts, the soldiers do not think of glory or adventure as one would expect, but of the most mundane things like "firelit homes, clean beds and wives.". The picture painted is much bleaker than the reader would expect. The bleakness is further emphasized by the second stanza which seems to imply that none of the soldiers survived. They are described as "gnawed by rats" and "lashed with rain" which implies that their bodies are rotting away in the no man's land not having been reclaimed. After death the soldiers continue to dream of their simple lives, of beloved ball games and other sporting activities and even of such supposedly boring activities as "going to the office in the train" which in early war poetry was juxtaposed to the glorious death in war.

The poem does a great deal to humanize the soldiers through their dreams. They are not infallible paragons of chivalric ideals, instead they have their own faults and when the battle truly begins, they would rather be anywhere else, but they are dreaming of peace instead. And once the battle is over, there is no sense of triumph but only an even deeper longing for those same mundane pleasures.

There is a noticeable difference in how Sassoon employs the early war propaganda in these poems when compared to the previous chapter. The elements of early war propaganda are used more overtly. The use of propaganda is not as apparent and possibly not as necessary as the soldiers themselves would be aware of it already. The soldiers are also presented as very vulnerable and not in control of their own situation.

To sum up, we can say that there is a noticeable difference between how war propaganda is used by Sassoon in his poetry dealing with the home front when compared to how it is used in the poetry taking place at the frontline. In the first case the use of propaganda elements seems more confrontational. It is mostly used to highlight contradictions and contrasting ideas inherent in it by juxtaposing them with the direct experience of the war. In frontline poetry it is much more subtle and sometimes propaganda is used almost as a framework for ideas that are directly opposite to what is ostensibly presented through Sassoon's clever use of words like in "Dreamers". In both cases the anti-war aspect is achieved through the use of black humor or irony, especially in his late war poetry.

Conclusion

The aim of the thesis was to analyse Sassoon's use of elements of war propaganda to achieve the effect that is quite the opposite to the ostensible meaning of these poems. For this purpose a selection of Sassoon's war poetry was analysed using the close reading method in order to demonstrate how precisely this effect was achieved. Two kinds of poems were examined – those dealing with the home front and others describing the experiences of the front line. During the war there was a clearly perceived discrepancy between these two perceptions which Sassoon undertakes to examine. The home front poems show how distorted and out of touch with the frontline reality were the perceptions by the uninformed civilians. To facilitate a better understanding of the poems the literary review provides the background to Sassoon's perception of the war by examining his social background, his reasons for enlisting in 1914, his war record, his disillusionment concerning war that set in in 1916, his letter of protest which was seen as a wilful defiance of military authority and which resulted him being sent to a convalescence home which however did not change his

increasingly bitter and ironical view of the war. He as a writer very felicitously illustrates the change that occurred in the perception of war by his generation who had entered the war with high chivalric ideals, had fought according to them but whose idealism was undermined by the reality of the new industrialized war of attrition to which these ideals had not prepared them. The resultant poetry juxtaposes those very ideals and very different reality in ways that are ironic and humorous and yet at the same time lay bare physical and mental horrors of modern warfare. The poem "They" exposes the hollowness of the platitudes handed out by the Anglican church to the disabled soldiers by juxtaposing the devastating wounds and the bishop's inane blathering's. "The Hero" shows a grief-stricken mother who clings to the idea that her son died a heroic death while the officer under whom her son served is shown through an internal monologue to have blatantly lied to her, as the dead soldier was a wastrel and a coward, it illustrates how the war propaganda with the kindest of aims clung to the idealized view of war heroism. "Memorial Tablet" shows with bitter irony the gulf between the supposed glory of death in war and the reality of being blown to bits and drowning in mud at the western front. The trivialization of the soldier's sacrifice is poignantly highlighted by placing his name at the bottom of the list of the dead on the memorial tablet that the squire who made him volunteer has installed in the village church. The troops at the western front were supposed to fight for the green and pleasant land. The poem "The One-Legged Man" describes a returning soldier who can indeed marvel at the beauty of his native landscape but he has lost his leg and instead of rejoicing at the beauty around him he instead feels grateful and joyful that only his leg was amputated, and he could return home. Among the dealing with the frontline, the callous stupidity and disregard for life of the high command is described in the poem "The General". The ostensible sense of accord between the general and his proud soldiers marching by as he sends them to the frontline is belied by how they think of each other, the soldiers think of the general's staff as incompetent swine, while the general takes his revenge through his ineffective battle plans.

“Died of Wounds” describes a soldier’s last night in a field hospital as he lies dying of his horrible injuries, his suffering is made a mockery of by referring to his agonizing loss of life by the officials as a *Slight Wound*. “The Dreamers” undermines the official narrative of the war propaganda by showing that the soldiers waiting for battle do not dream of a glorious sacrifice but instead their dreams are of simple and mundane things like home comforts and even of the pre-war dreary jobs but they are denied even this small hope because they are shown as having been blown to bits and rotting away in the battlefield.

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Appendix

“They”

The bishop tells us: “when the boys come back
 They will not be the same; for they’ll have fought
 In a just cause: they lead the last attack
 On Anti-Christ; their comrades’ blood has bought
 New right to breed an honorable race,
 They have challenged Death and dared him face to face.”

We’re none of us the same!” the boys reply.
 “For George lost both his legs; and Bill’s stone blind;
 Poor Jim’s shot through the lungs and like to die;
 And Bert’s gone syphilitic: You’ll not find
 A chap who’s served that hasn’t found *some* change.”
 And the Bishop said: “The ways of God are strange!”

Siegfried Sassoon, 31 October 1916. (Roberts 2005:153)

“The Hero”

"Jack fell as he'd have wished," the Mother said,
 And folded up the letter that she'd read.
 "The Colonel writes so nicely." Something broke
 In the tired voice that quavered to a choke.
 She half looked up. "We mothers are so proud
 Of our dead soldiers." Then her face was bowed.

Quietly the Brother Officer went out.
 He'd told the poor old dear some gallant lies
 That she would nourish all her days, no doubt.
 For while he coughed and mumbled, her weak eyes
 Had shone with gentle triumph, brimmed with joy,
 Because he'd been so brave, her glorious boy.

He thought how "Jack," cold-footed, useless swine,
 Had panicked down the trench that night the mine
 Went up at Wicked Corner; how he'd tried
 To get sent home; and how, at last, he died,

Blown to small bits. And no one seemed to care
 Except that lonely woman with white hair.

Siegfried Sassoon. (Roberts 2005:289)

“Memorial tablet”

Squire nagged and bullied till I went to fight,
 (Under Lord Derby’s Scheme). I died in hell—
 (They called it Passchendaele). My wound was slight,
 And I was hobbling back; and then a shell
 Burst slick upon the duck-boards: so I fell
 Into the bottomless mud, and lost the light.

At sermon-time, while Squire is in his pew,
 He gives my gilded name a thoughtful stare:
 For, though low down upon the list, I’m there;
 ‘In proud and glorious memory’ ... that’s my due.
 Two bleeding years I fought in France, for Squire:
 I suffered anguish that he’s never guessed.
 Once I came home on leave: and then went west...
 What greater glory could a man desire?

Siegfried Sassoon, November 1918. (Roberts 2005:359)

“The One-Legged Man”

Propped on a stick he viewed the August weald;
 Squat orchard trees and oasts with painted cowls;
 A homely, tangled hedge, a corn-stalked field,
 And sound of barking dogs and farmyard fowls.

And he’d come home again to find it more
 Desirable than ever it was before.
 How right it seemed that he should reach the span
 Of comfortable years allowed to man!
 Splendid to eat and sleep and choose a wife,
 Safe with his wound, a citizen of life.
 He hobbled blithely through the garden gate,
 And thought: ‘Thank God they had to amputate!’

Siegfried Sassoon, August 1916, (Roberts 2005:258)

“The General”

“Good-morning, good-morning!” the General said
 When we met him last week on our way to the line.
 Now the soldiers he smiled at are most of 'em dead,
 And we're cursing his staff for incompetent swine.
 “He's a cheery old card,” grunted Harry to Jack
 As they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack.

But he did for them both by his plan of attack.

Siegfried Sassoon, April 1917. (Roberts 2005:158)

“Died of Wounds”

His wet white face and miserable eyes
 Brought nurses to him more than groans and sighs:
 But hoarse and low and rapid rose and fell
 His troubled voice: he did the business well.

The ward grew dark; but he was still complaining
 And calling out for ‘Dickie’. ‘Curse the Wood!
 ‘It’s time to go. O Christ, and what’s the good?
 ‘We’ll never take it, and it’s always raining.’

I wondered where he’d been; then heard him shout,
 ‘They snipe like hell! O Dickie, don’t go out...
 I fell asleep ... Next morning he was dead;
 And some *Slight Wound* lay smiling on the bed.

Siegfried Sassoon, July 1916. (Roberts 2005:273)

“Dreamers”

Soldiers are citizens of death's grey land,
 Drawing no dividend from time's to-morrows.
 In the great hour of destiny they stand,

Each with his feuds, and jealousies, and sorrows.
Soldiers are sworn to action; they must win
Some flaming, fatal climax with their lives.
Soldiers are dreamers; when the guns begin
They think of firelit homes, clean beds and wives.

I see them in foul dug-outs, gnawed by rats,
And in the ruined trenches, lashed with rain,
Dreaming of things they did with balls and bats,
And mocked by hopeless longing to regain
Bank-holidays, and picture shows, and spats,
And going to the office in the train.

Siegfried Sassoon, Craiglockhart 1917. (Roberts 2005:125)

Resümees

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Armas Jürgenson

Usage of elements of the early war 'lie' in Sassoons late war poetry, Varajase sõjapropaganda elementide kasutus Sassooni sõjavastases luules

Bakalaureusetöö

2025

Lehekülgede arv: 29

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Uurimistöös vaadeldakse esmalt, kuidas 19. sajandi viktoorianlikud arusaamad rüütellikusest mõjutasid sõjaideid, mis võimaldas Briti Impeeriumil värvata 1914.–1916. aastatel ligi kaks miljonit vabatahtlikku; sõjapropaganda mõju sõduritele endile ja kodurindele ning selle tulemusena Siegfried Sassooni 1916.–1918. aastate luules tema sõjakogemuse ümberhindamist. Lõputöö koosneb kahest peatükist. Esimeses peatükis käsitletakse Briti 20. sajandi alguse ühiskonda ja Sassooni kasvatust, esimese maailmasõja algust aastal 1914 ja Sassooni innukat vabatahtlikuna sõtta minemist ning alates 1916. aastast Sassooni sõjalise võimu tahtlikku trotsimist.

Teises peatükis analüüsitakse valikut Sassooni sõjaluuletusi, kasutades lähilugemise meetodit, et uurida, kuidas Sassoon kasutab sõjavastases sõnumis sõja alguse propaganda elemente. Luuletuste analüüsiosa on jagatud kaheks selle põhjal, kas tegevus toimub kodu- või eesliinil. Analüüsist ilmneb, et Sassooni propaganda elementide kasutamine erineb sellest, kas ta luuletused puudutavad eesliinil või kodurindel toimuvat. Kodurindel puudutavates luuletustes kasutab Sassoon sõja alguse propaganda elemente selgemalt ja teravamalt, samas kui eesliinil puudutavas luules, on propaganda viited pigem varjatud. Analüüsi põhjal võib järeldada, et Sassoon kasutas paljusid sõjapropaganda elemente selleks, et rõhutada sõja tegelikku õudust, kasutades vastanduseks rüütellike ideede motiive. Teine tähtis element Sassooni luules on tema teadlik sõnavalik. Sassoon kasutab sõnavara mis oli tolle aja lugejale tuttav rüütellikest romaanidest ja propagandaluulest, kuid seda sõjakogemuse kontekstis, mis tihti annab tema luulele ka teatava iroonilise alatoonid ja teravuse.

Märksõnad: esimene maailmasõda, Siegfried Sassoon, luule, propaganda

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