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Poets of the Great War

Bakalářská práce

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This thesis is concerned with the poetry of the Great War. The aim of the thesis is to analyze the selected authors, their works and show the impact of combat experience in the poetry. Historical context and themes will be included as well as personal correspondence and visual materials.

1. Introduction
2. Historical Context and Themes
3. Wilfred Owen
4. Siegfried Sassoon
5. Isaac Rosenberg
6. Additional Writers
7. Poetry by Women
8. Visual Material
9. Conclusion

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Fussell, Paul. *The Great War and Modern Memory*. Oxford University Press, 2013. Print.
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The thesis is concerned with the poetry of the Great War. The aim of the thesis is to analyse the selected authors' their works and state the degree of cohesion in the poetry. Historical context and themes will be included as well as personal conclusions and visual material.

1. Introduction
2. Historical Context and Themes
3. World War
4. Selected Authors
5. Text Analysis
6. Additional Works
7. Poetry by Women
8. Visual Material
9. Conclusion

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1 INTRODUCTION

This bachelor thesis is concerned with the poetry of the Great War. It introduces fragments of war experience in order to create a full piece representing the mind of a Great War poet and his message. Not all of selected poets concerned themselves with the same themes making the mix particularly valuable for their unique perspective on war and what it meant for the people. I will analyse selected authors and their works with respect to mutual war experience and show the impact of combat experience or its absence in the poetry.

The First World War must be understood within the social and historical context of that period. It was an era of rapid technological advancement with grave consequences for people living in it and everybody that followed since. It is important to explore sources of knowledge other than history books to comprehend the ordeal that the Great War presented. Poetry is one such source containing accounts of war poets who earned their place by mapping this difficult era of human experience.

The second chapter of this thesis contains the necessary historical context from the Western and the Eastern Front as well as the steps that had been taken to give rise to this conflict in the first place. In the following subchapter, I will analyse the industrial revolution and its consequences. There are several subchapters dealing with the impact the war had on soldiers, civilians and the whole British society. In addition, there is a subchapter examining women's role in the conflict. The first section concludes with a study of the state of English war poetry written before the 1914 including some pieces that were published at the beginning of the First World War.

Furthermore, the subsequent essential part of my thesis is divided into three subchapters, each dealing with one of the selected poets of the First World War—Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and Edward Thomas. Every subchapter contains the basic information about the author followed by poetry analysis where I define relevant themes and display them on concrete examples in the text.

Throughout the thesis, the role of religion and the church is discussed in order to illustrate the significant issues pertaining to the First World War poetry. Kings and monarchs would use religion as a pretext for expanding their territories or as a cause under which banner they would unite the people. The Great War as the name suggests was a major conflict and as such one would expect that religious believes would play a substantial part in lives of those who lived during that time. Nevertheless, the authors of

poetry that I chose for this thesis did not find the role of church nor religious themes vital for their work. Due to the fact that poetry covers a wide range of topics, motifs and even interests it is very unusual to come across any religious poems even though its symbolism and imagery permeates many a poem. It is so because religion, mainly Christianity, does not represent a single image nor is it relevant for justifying the war or providing the historical context. Consequently, there will be no section devoted to authors or poems dealing with religion.

Poetry is a vital part of the twentieth century cultural heritage and thus is invaluable for better understanding of the Great War mainly because it comes from so many different people—soldiers, women, civilians, prisoners of war etc. Historical data do not fully illustrate the range and degree of suffering. These are to be shown on the relevant pieces of the Great War poetry.

2 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The war to end all wars.

—H. G. Wells

In the second chapter of my thesis, I will discuss the main events that sparked the flames of war. The necessary context from the eastern theatre is included as well as consequences of the industrial revolution with all respective achievements and failures. Also, there is a paragraph devoted to political and social consequences with regard to formation of new states, migration etc. Soldiers were not the only ones who paid their dues in the war because women demonstrated tremendous amount of resilience through hard work and by taking care of the wounded men on the front. As vital parts of the war effort, a subsection on women's endeavours in the conflict is included as well as an honourable mention of animal companions that played an important part too. Furthermore, attention will be paid to poets and poetry movements that took prominence before the arrival of the war poets—including selected Victorian poets, Georgian poetry movement, plus sentimental poetry by Grenfell and Brooke. The chapter is concluded with remarks about British society and its changing preference towards poetry that tackled the upcoming horrors with a much needed realistic approach.

2.1 The Conflict

The Great War started on 28th June 1914 with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie, Duchess of Hohenberg. These events took place in Sarajevo when the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne came to Serbia's capital on an official visit. Nobody, except for the Black Hand secret society, could anticipate the visit to be one of the gravest mistakes that would cost hundreds of millions of people their home, family, loved ones or, most importantly, their lives. Chaos and destruction soon followed as Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia upon rejection of Austria-Hungary's diplomatic ultimatums. One by one European empires fulfilled their treaties by raising armies to support their political partners. Thus the World War I became the conflict of two sides—the Allies, consisting of mostly French, British and Russian forces, against the combined armies of Germany and Austria-Hungary—the Central Powers.

2.1.1 The Western Front

The Western Front was a sequence of minor skirmishes and major offenses. In the early days, nobody believed that the war would last longer than a year. Generals issued the troops to push on and ignored the problems of the stalemate and stagnating trench warfare. However, as the conflict prolonged beyond expectation with increasing number of fruitless offensives, everyone, especially governments and soldiers, began to understand that this conflict will be won by well-built defences with dependable supply lines rather than aggression. Major offenses like Somme, Verdun, Marne, bringing about terrible casualties with little or no territorial gains, demonstrated that defence will be the suitable strategy for the western theatre. The Battle of the Marne marked the beginning of the trench warfare stalemate. Allied troops halted rapid German advance through Belgium and France along the river Marne. French divisions reinforced by British Expeditionary Force repelled attacking German forces and forced them into a retreat north-west where they began the construction of elaborate systems of trenches. Allied armies responded by creating trench lines of their own alongside German trenches. These fortification systems were easily defensible and very hard to breach once the area in between—no man's land—changed into a muddy marsh. As the war progressed the frontlines were further protected by machinegun nests, mortar batteries and rows of barbed wire enhanced by booby-traps, tin bombs as well as dangerous mine fields.

The most common image of the Great War is that of a no man's land where the face of the earth is scarred with countless blackened craters. On each side of this unforgiving place there are trenches and dugouts with never-ending horizontal rows of barbed wire. Where used to be trees there are only splintered stumps or nothing. The ground turned to muddy puddles filled with cartridges, shell casings as well as dead soldiers whose corpses still remain half buried in clay or trapped in the barbed wire fences. That is, mostly, the image of warfare in Belgium and France, the Western Front. However, let us not forget about the events on the Eastern Front even though the aim of this thesis is focused on British war poets who were involved in the Western Europe. The situation on the Eastern Front is crucial for understanding the dynamics of the conflict and as such the following paragraphs analyse the necessary context from the Eastern episodes.

2.1.2 The Eastern Front

The development in the Middle-East theatre was much more fluent than the stalemate on the Western Front. Where trench warfare became the fight for a few meters of enemy territory at a time, the campaign in the East was more dynamic and decisive. The initial success of Russian military, supported by Romanian forces, turned out to be short-lived as the disintegrating Russian command grew incapable of defeating the Central powers reinforced by the Ottoman troops invading from the South. After several failed battles, offensives and skirmishes, the already highly-destabilized Russian empire imploded giving way to new political uprisings that engulfed the whole country forcing tsar Nicholas II to abdicate. The most prominent of all the factions were Bolsheviks who came to power in 1917 following their crushing victory in the October Revolution. Soon after the Bolshevik coup d'état, the new government signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918 which ended Russia's participation in the conflict.

The loss of an ally did not prove critical for the Allied forces because the Russian empire was not the only one with a withering domestic situation. Unlike Britain or Germany, whose peoples came together united by a common enemy and goal, the Ottoman Empire faced a similar crisis as the Russians. It stretched too far and ruled over too many nationalities that demanded freedom. Emboldened by the fact that the Ottoman Turks could not hold all their assets in check by force, several ethnic minorities sought liberation from oppression and occupation. Fuelled by mistreatment and even genocide, the opposition grew in strength until the civil revolts and uprisings ended the Ottoman rule in the Middle Eastern theatre. The Ottoman Empire collapsed and the victorious sides divided the territories according to the Treaty of Sèvres.

The most important consequences were the recreation of new independent states (Czechoslovakia included) and the establishing of new spheres of influence. The Russian and the Ottoman empires forfeited many territories that declared independence. Furthermore, many people resettled back to their original homeland which strengthened global social and democratic tendencies as well as self-determination. People united by similar fates came together to start living again and to help rebuild the devastated continents. Finally, in words of Mahatma Gandhi, "peace is its own reward."

2.2 Industrial Revolution and Its Consequences

The beginning of the twentieth century saw the most horrifying conflict. It was the era of change where the industrial machinery manifested its power. Due to the new

weaponry and inventions such as artillery shells containing shrapnel, explosives or poisonous gas, machine-guns or even something as simple as a barbed wire, the strength in numbers was no longer decisive. Combat was unparalleled in terms of casualties and carnage.

On one hand, technological development increased the rate at which the infrastructure of the country changed from rural to urban. New horizons enabled by technical advances and upgraded budget from boosted war economy were literary turning everything around. Instead of cavalry, tanks and aeroplanes became indispensable not only in the Great War but also in every other conflict to come. However, every coin has two sides. With deepening worldwide crisis, every nation sought to increase their fighting chances in a conflict that was sure to come. The technological advances were put to military use and these new achievements proved more deadly than anything the world had seen so far. They empowered their creators to wage war more effectively and keep the opposing sides supplied for longer periods of time, resulting in a prolonged conflict that raged for four years.

Another consequence of the Industrial Revolution would be immigration as tens of thousands of fugitives were roaming through Europe from regions that had already been marked by conflicts like the Balkan wars or incessant incursions of the Ottoman Empire. Industrialization had one more corresponding effect on the stratification of the population as more and more people were forced to abandon their birthplace to seek work in more prosperous urban regions. In addition, the surplus of people who were no longer needed to work the fields were mustered and distributed into army and navy. Martin Stephen explains: “The wealth of the industrial society could pay for them, arm them, feed them, and clothe them. The railways could bring them to a given point faster and more efficiently than ever before.”¹ Therefore, one could argue that men invented the means to reach the afterlife sooner than expected.

2.3 Casualties of War—In War, Truth is the First Casualty

This section is dedicated to examples of the most decimating forces that appeared out of poor sanitation—diseases and epidemics. Additionally, fatal devices like poisonous gases and other chemicals are discussed. Finally, there is an honourable mention of animals that served in the theatres of the Great War.

¹ Martin Stephen, *Poems of the First World War: 'Never Such Innocence'* (London: Everyman, 1993), VIII.

2.3.1 Soldiers

Fatal injuries from fighting were not the only cause of death. In fact, epidemics and poor sanitary conditions caused more deaths than the combat. Hundreds of thousands on all sides succumbed to illnesses like malaria, Spanish flu, trench foot or typhus. In the theatre of war, soldiers were faced with dire conditions—malnourishment, deprivation of sleep, damp weather, stagnant water etc. The stalemate with its wet, muddy trenches tested the men's resolve; yet not every condition can be treated with a dry pair of socks or a hot meal. A soldier that survived the fighting over the no man's land could still be identified a casualty of war and find himself disabled for a very long period of time. The reason for this state was a new kind of injury—the shellshock, which would be associated with today's posttraumatic stress disorder. The psychological scars run deeper than flesh wounds. Veterans experienced panic attacks, inability to fall asleep, very intense instances of headache, dizziness and tremors. Shellshock conditions were usually dismissed without proper consideration or treatment due to the lack of sufficient medical knowledge of the issue. Early cases received mild attention or they were even regarded as the lack of courage on the soldier's part.

2.3.2 Civilians

The days of effective cavalry usage were over since motorized vehicles, tanks, submarines or aircraft became far more superior on the battlefield. In addition, the world had never seen more civilian casualties because of these men-made devices. Airstrikes, along with heavy artillery bombardments often missed their targets for the lack of sophisticated targeting systems as many of newly developed war-machines still lacked the appropriate technology that was refined in the following century. Another reason for higher civilian casualties is the use of chemical substances and gases. People that did not manage to evacuate suffered from chemical burns or suffocation due to the lack of army-issued gas masks and other necessary equipment. Chemical warfare used to be unpredictable in its initial stages. During several battles the gas even hit the forces that dispersed it—the wind either did not carry it all the way through the no man's land or even blew it back to the friendly trench or a nearby settlement. After the war, many countries signed treaties that prohibited the future use of chemical weapons.

2.3.3 Animals

Since long before Jesus Christ was born, horses played a very significant role in times of war serving as trusted mounts for men of status or pulling chariots and carts. Because of their strength, they became an effective force used for hard labours. In every conflict, cavalry charge used to be the most devastating element on the battlefield. However, the Great War proved deadly not only to the soldiers but especially to the animals that served them. Horses suffered the highest number of casualties. During the Great War, these creatures performed important duties like hauling artillery guns, transportation and even though very soon found obsolete in actual combat, they remained operational until the end in 1918. Another creature valued for their dependability was a dog. Dogs acted as messengers carrying orders and mail on the front via containers attached to their bodies. They even helped setting up communication lines by moving telegraph wire from one trench to another. In addition, dogs were not the only animals carrying messages during the war. Messenger pigeons became indispensable to the war effort as they transported orders from headquarters to the front line. The situation on the front often changed and retreating men were without any means to send a message of their current situation or position. A pigeon messenger was fast, reliable and able to cover a lot of ground. Animals in general earned a distinguished place among soldiers on both sides and had been appreciated for their bravery.

On the bright side, because of encountered misfortunes, the advancement in the field of medicine became one of the most fast-developing fields of study. Medical society dedicated no small amount of focus to discoveries regarding human psyche. Moreover, medical advances with respect to the treatment of combat-wounded men as well as setting of bones and improved plastic surgery reached its new peaks, enabling the treatment of previously hopeless cases. Among many inventions, mobile x-ray machine, splint and motorized ambulance proved useful tools that helped physicians to save many lives.

2.4 British Society during WWI

2.4.1 Changing Perspective

Citizens were shocked by the ever increasing number of casualties. After such grave reports it was only natural that with the world on its toes the poetry also undergone a change—a change in form, theme and complexity. The poems of the early days of war

are very different from “decaying Romanticism”² that proved out-dated and simply not adequate to address the themes that were so common for soldiers in the trenches. As Wilfred Owen said, “the true poet must be truthful.”³ However, the perception of truthfulness varies from person to person and poets who did not take part in a military campaign are not altogether representative. For seeing the conflict as it was, a change of perspective is needed. People with their boots on the ground treading the same mud with fellow soldiers—poets of the Great War like Wilfred Owen or Edmund Blunden who saw the suffering with their own eyes. It was easy to label all oncoming poetry as “different” because “there had never been a war like the Great War.”⁴ Consequently, as the pastoral poetry fell out of fashion, more realistic work of other core Georgian poets like Robert Graves, Edward Thomas or Siegfried Sassoon gained popularity and became the new standard.

2.4.2 Life in Trenches

Soldiers were encouraged to write home now and then to calm their families and prompt a supportive action towards the war. On the other side of the English Channel, families, relatives and friends of those who departed to fight were also encouraged to pass on only good news and words of comfort. It was the belief of the British army that crucial for an allied victory will be the morale of the soldiers which could be brought up by maintaining a necessary routine.⁵ We have to understand that a typical infantryman had very little to do on the Western Front except to keep vigil. Although the life in the trenches was tough, there was always a time for occasional hobbies like playing cards, smoking and the most favourite activity—home writing or reading mail. These casual exercises insured that a soldier remained committed and ready for combat as much as for less entertaining duties among which the most important would be repairing the trenches and clearing them from debris and dead bodies plus cleaning their rifles to prevent them from jamming.

² Stephen, *Poems*, 1.

³ Owen, *Collected Poems*, 31.

⁴ Stephen, *Poems*, 1.

⁵ BBC, “How did 12 million letters reach WW1 soldiers each week?,” pres. Alan Johnson, *World War One BBC Guide*, accessed February 26, 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/guides/zqtmyrd>.

2.4.3 The Role of Women in the Conflict

Enlisted men had a rough time abroad but those who they left behind—women, children, the old and disabled, had to fight very hard to fend for themselves in time of food shortages and general lack of everyday commodities. All supplies were rationed or obtainable for unduly expense most people could not afford to pay. Thus the main reason for women to venture forth seeking employment or even having to resolve to allowing their children to work as well.

With men being shipped abroad to fight, new work opportunities arose for everybody willing to pick it up. Women were doing hard labour in the mines, factories or in agriculture which was unprecedented until the 1914. They understood the responsibility and even welcomed it.

In many countries across Europe, where nationalism and imperialism ignited territorial conquest, rose feminist or other female groups which saw the opportunity to seize the moment to help with “certain” tasks. Among others, women worked in the ammunition factories or took care of the sick and wounded from the battlefields. By driving the machine of war at home they helped their country to achieve its political goals and put themselves on a promising path towards equal rights spurred by social egalitarian commitment.

Although the social and political position of women did not develop to be all equal to men, there was an important degree of recognition for their contribution to the war effort from which women benefited. Due to high degree of censorship that limited the direct coverage of the war at the front, media used this lack of opportunity to focus on the “home front.” With increased popularity female workers in general received much more than just higher wages and direct involvement in public affairs. They were praised for their patriotism and, as Angela Woollacott notes, some of the workers were even awarded “the Order of the British Empire for bravery during explosions or accidents and for injuries they suffered.”⁶ Although the number of women who died during industrial work cannot be compared to the number of lives lost at the front, we have to understand that factory assignments were often dangerous. Women toiled in harsh conditions which included toxic fumes, deafening noise from heavy machinery or volatile substances for manufacture of explosives. It is estimated that during the course of the war over a thousand of incidents resulted in death by poisoning and explosions.

⁶ Angela Woollacott, *On Her Their lives Depend: Munitions Workers in the Great War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 8.

Woollacott points out: “when their deaths were publicly announced, they too were called noble; but for reasons of security and national morale, these factory injuries and fatalities were cover up as far as possible.”⁷ With increasing rate of previously uncommon injuries like discoloration of the skin, dermatitis or jaundice women workers also brought about the change in medical care and appropriate stockpiles of first aid supplies in working areas. These problems were immediate consequences of dangerous work with chemicals such as TNT and other explosives, especially in shell-filling factories.

The Great War held a title “the first” in many categories. It was the first conflict to be fought on a global scale. People from all corners of the world contributed one way or another. It was the war that changed all wars to come. Countries began to rely on armoured vehicles, machines, gadgets, weapons and biochemical weapons of all sorts. Never before could men obliterate their enemies so quickly and efficiently. However, the destruction is not the only thing that came out of this conflict. Health care had never been better. Many innovations served the people to improve their standard of living or proved critical in saving rather than taking other people’s lives. In addition, it opened up new ways for women to secure their future and show that they are more than capable to step up to the plate in a patriarchal society.

2.5 The State of English War Poetry So Far

The nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth are considered to be the peak of the British Empire. It stretched far and wide with hundreds of millions of people living under the influence of the crown. It was an era marked by prosperous trade, global influence and little domestic unrest. The British Empire became powerful and remained unchallenged in military might which they wielded with pride even though there were several major conflicts that the British took part in and did not always emerge victorious—at least not morally nor politically. The most pertinent examples would be the Boer Wars and the Crimean War.

Before the Great War broke out, the Georgian Poetry movement was the most prominent group of British writers with, according to Stephen, “Rupert Brooke as its chief young star.”⁸ Equally important were Victorian poets such as Alfred Tennyson or

⁷ Woollacott, *On Her Their lives Depend*, 9–10.

⁸ Stephen, *Poems*, XI.

Robert Browning who came before the Georgians and tackled different years and incidents which paved the road to global chaos.

When a Victorian poet wrote about personal traits like courage or patriotism, their romanticized vision of death on the battlefield would strike a modern reader as sentimental, absurd even. Alfred Tennyson commemorated the deeds of English cavalymen who fought during the Battle of Balaclava on 25th October 1854 in the Crimean War. His famous poem “The Charge of the Light Brigade” (1854) is full of admiration for the fallen soldiers. He wanted the readers back home to feel proud that they share cultural bond with these brave six hundred who “rode into the valley of death” without asking questions.⁹ Tennyson wanted to inspire the people to give their best for their country as “They that had fought so well.”¹⁰ Another example of sentimental streak in pre-war poetry is the work of Rupert Brooke. His idealistic sonnets, especially “The Soldier” (1915), “occup[y] a secure place in English literature as a representative of the mood and character of England before World War I.”¹¹ He glorifies England and the idea to die for it:

If I should die, think only this of me:
That there’s some corner of a foreign field
That is for ever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam.¹²

Many Edwardian poets saw the conflict as an opportunity for young men to prove themselves. If they openly did not welcome the war, authors like Brooke, Grenfell, or even Kipling “gave it tacit approval.”¹³ However, such sentiments were mostly short-lived. Loss, grief, fear, suffering made them understand that such a tragedy for human kind should not be idolized nor endorsed. Kipling’s opinions changed due to the death of his son¹⁴ which also prompted the creation of sombre short verses *Epitaphs*

⁹ Alfred, Lord Tennyson, “The Charge of the Light Brigade”, *Alfred, Lord Tennyson Poems* (Poemhunter.com - The World’s Poetry Archive, 2004), 295.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ “Rupert Brooke”, *Poetry Foundation*, accessed November 1, 2016, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/rupert-brooke>.

¹² Rupert Brooke, “The Soldier”, in *Poems of the First World War: ‘Never Such Innocence’*, 54.

¹³ Stephen, *Poems*, 28.

¹⁴ Ibid.

of the War (1919). “Batteries out of Ammunition” or “Common Form” are perfect examples of bitter and sorrowful verses that clearly show how much Kipling changed his assumptions about the War. For Brooke and Grenfell it was death outside the field of battle that stayed their hand from perhaps writing more uncompromising poetry about the horrors in trenches. Nevertheless, “positive” outlook on death, love and eagerness to fight—common traits in young men’s minds—is what made their poems unique in comparison with other war poets and perhaps what made the readers find comfort in the less dramatic form of naive verse. An example of such spirit is found in Brooke’s poem “Peace” (1914):

Oh! we, who have known shame, we have found release there,
Where there's no ill, no grief, but sleep has mending,
Naught broken save this body, lost but breath;
Nothing to shake the laughing heart's long peace there
But only agony, and that has ending;
And the worst friend and enemy is but Death.¹⁵

“Into Battle” (1915) by Julian Grenfell also captures the mood of the previously discussed “positive” approach to something as gruesome as warfare: “And he is dead who will not fight, / And who dies fighting has increase.”¹⁶ Grenfell cherished going to war. It comes as no surprise that he wrote in his letter: “I adore war. It is like a big picnic without the objectivelessness of a picnic. I have never been more well or more happy.”¹⁷

The feelings and sentiments of Brooke or Grenfell are utterly divergent from those of Sassoon or Owen. The latter poets wrote bitter unsentimental poetry that resonated with hard truth, thus earning the respect to be regarded as the true heralds of the Great War. As the myth of “*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*” quickly diminished from the minds of recruits and Edwardian society—poets, men of letter among them, Owen’s words of wisdom “I am not concerned with poetry. / My subject is

¹⁵ Rupert Brooke, “Peace”, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/detail/13074>.

¹⁶ Julian Grenfell, “Into Battle”, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/47261>.

¹⁷ Neil Hollander, *Elusive Dove: The Search For Peace During World War I* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2013), 191.

war, and the pity of war. / The poetry is in the pity”¹⁸ became the new direction, standard. Consequently, inherited traditions were found inadequate with every son, father, brother or uncle butchered in thousands daily. If Britain were to send their sons to die on some foreign coast it had to have been for something greater than out of date ideals of past generations.

Apart from later poems by battle-scarred veterans like Isaac Rosenberg, Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen that showed the society what the war was about, there were some pieces in early stages of pre-war poetry that are worth to mention. Despite the contemporary trend of pastoral poetry and patriotic verse, various poems like D. H. Lawrence’s “Service of All the Dead” (1915), Thomas Hardy’s “The Man He Killed” (1909) or perhaps Charles Hamilton Sorley’s “Rooks” (1916) offer a great deal more insight into future struggles. From their singular point of view a reader can sense the heightened understanding of bad things to come. Its mood is dark; something is hanging in the air. Martin Stephen points out that “Sorley saw what the war would be more clearly than any other poet except for Thomas Hardy.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Wilfred Owen, *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*, ed. C. Day Lewis (New York: New Directions, 1963), 31.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

3 POETS OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Events of the First World War nurtured some of the best writers of the twentieth century and provided the necessary subject matter for countless poems, novels and stories that have changed the perspective of millions of people since. In the third chapter, I will focus on selected poets that embody the notion of a war poet and identify encompassing themes.

3.1 Wilfred Owen

Wilfred Owen is one of many who wrote out of his extensive experience as a soldier from trenches of France. Although he did not see the end of the Great War, the period of fifteen months that he spent abroad made his work all the more powerful. The author's physical struggle together with psychological trauma proved very important for mental development which led the young poet to become the true herald of the Great War. He was awarded the Military Cross "for conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty."²⁰ The fact that he died in his twenties on the battlefield made him all the more a perfect representative of his generation. Owen was a soldier first, a poet second—that is why he could not only comprehend the feelings of his men but also write about them in the poetry. It is not an easy task to distance oneself from the constant violence, to compose poetry that talks about the unspeakable, to make readers understand the unfathomable. Owen, being aware of this most challenging task, understood the need for a change in perspective but also a change in structure and the use of language in order to succeed as a genuine war poet.

3.1.1 Battle Scars — Shellshock

When Owen left for the Western Front in early January 1917, his spirits could not have been higher. Alas, after fierce fighting and tough days on the front which were marked by winter attrition, he became one of the victims diagnosed with shellshock.

At first, this yet unknown mental illness was regarded as controversial to say the least. According to contemporary stringent military code these affected soldiers were not taken earnestly because nobody really understood the effects of heavy bombing and crucial sleep deprivation caused by frequent mortar strikes. However, in mid-1917,

²⁰ *The London Gazette* (Supplement), no. 31480, p. 9761, 29 July 1919, <https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/31480/supplement/9761>.

when Owen himself was relieved of command and transferred to Craiglockheart War Hospital in Edinburgh, this particular mental illness had already been registered as a serious consequence of exposure to intensive bombardment or combat. Fortunately for Owen, Craiglockheart War Hospital would become his sanctuary in many regards.

Firstly, he finally got to see his mother Susan Owen who visited him in early July. From personal correspondence we know that Owen's relationship with his mother was very dear not only for the fact that she was his family but most importantly because she was the one person to whom Owen remained honest and direct in his thoughts. "I can see no excuse for deceiving you."²¹ Secondly, he met a very special person—his future mentor and friend Siegfried Sassoon.

3.1.2 Mental Change, Sobering Up

The young poet was one of those authors whose view of moral values like honour, comradeship and patriotism radically changed. Before the departure for France and war, he wrote a poem originally entitled "The Ballad of Peace and War" (1914) in which the lines go: "Oh meet it is and passing sweet / To live in peace with others, / But sweeter still and far more meet / to die in war for brothers."²² Owen's career as an officer in the Manchester Regiment offered many an opportunity to make up his mind free of propaganda. After assuming command of the third platoon on Somme near Beaumont Hamel, he had seen plenty of action before being relieved of command and evacuated to 13th CCS with shell-shock.

After what he saw in trenches of France, the mood of naive appraisal of manly values mediated by Victorian authors without combat experience shifted radically. Such a shift of sentiments would find an introduction with Sassoon as the primary cause. By the time Owen met Siegfried Sassoon, the older poet had already concerned himself with anti-war poetry. Such a feeling was not entirely unfamiliar to Owen but Sassoon's work had tremendous impact on Owen's artistic course. Regular visits with Sassoon opened his eyes towards the bitter truth that is explained in one of his best anti-war poems: "Dulce et Decorum Est" (1920), which was drafted roughly two months after his admission to Craiglockhart War Hospital in Edinburgh.

²¹ Wilfred Owen, *Collected Letters*, ed. Harold Owen and John Bell (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 427.

²² Wilfred Owen, *The War Poems*, ed. Jon Stallworthy (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), XXXII.

“Dulce et Decorum Est” holds a valuable insight to the narrator’s mind, who sees the suffering with his own eyes. There is an image that he cannot shake. In the third stanza, Owen writes: “In all my dreams, before my helpless sight / He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.”²³ In the second line of the first stanza there is “we” instead of them. This shows that Owen counts himself amongst those “bent double, like old beggars under sacks / Knock-kneed, coughing like hags” men, who “drunk with fatigue” have to march on “asleep.”²⁴ Multiple horrifying images like men “gargling blood from the froth-corrupted lungs” or “drowning” in gas with “white eyes writhing in their faces” make this poem very naturalistic and help to build up the tension to emphasize the irony of the old famous Horatian patriotic quote: It is sweet and meet to die for one’s country, sweet and decorous. Furthermore, Horace used classical form of Latin which elegantly highlights the message of his statement whereas Owen’s language is actual, vernacular English that warns the reader not to be swayed by propaganda.

Patrick Jackson argues that “the would-be sonnet both describes and embodies war’s excess of violence and its accompanying fatigue.”²⁵ The structure of the poem with four stanzas also demonstrates this excess. A typical sonnet consists of fourteen lines (two quatrains and two tercets). “Dulce et Decorum Est” has twice the number. The fourteenth line is critical as the poem does not end there with the “floundering soldier in green sea” without the gas mask. Even after death the dead soldier is still haunting the narrator from “the wagon that we flung him in” with his “hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin.”²⁶ Owen uses additional fourteen lines—another sonnet’s length—to demonstrate this overwhelming appalling violence to further underline the pointlessness of war and once and for all dismiss “the old Lie.” As Jackson concludes: “traditional, nationalistic beliefs have been blotted out by superfluity (represented by the extra verse) and vitiated by exhaustion (represented by the final half-verse).”²⁷

²³ Wilfred Owen, “Dulce et Decorum Est,” <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/46560>.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Patrick Jackson, “Wilfred Owen and the Sublimity of Warfare,” *A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes, and Reviews* 24, no. 3 (2011): 171, DOI: 10.1080/0895769X.2011.590098.

²⁶ Owen, “Dulce et Decorum Est.”

²⁷ Jackson, “Wilfred Owen and the Sublimity of Warfare,” 172.

3.1.3 Themes

3.1.3.1 Compassion

On 12 January 1918 a pit explosion at the Podmore Hall Colliery, Halmerend, killed about 140 men and boy miners. The tragedy did not go unnoticed by Owen who, as a gesture of appreciation and support for the workers back home, wrote a poem about this disaster. Although it is not a war poem per se, the author comments: “Wrote a poem on the Colliery Disaster: but I get mixed up with the War at the end. It is short, but oh! sour.”²⁸ Lines 19—24 of “Miners” (1918) read:

Many the muscled bodies charred,
And few remember.

I thought of all that worked dark pits
Of war, and died
Digging the rock where Death reposes
Peace lies indeed.

The similarity to no man’s land pits and shell craters is apparent. Owen sees that workers, especially miners, may share the same inconsequential fate as soldiers and perhaps that is the reason he finishes the poem on a “sour” note:

The years will stretch their hands, well-cheered
By our life’s ember;

The centuries will burn rich loads
With which we groaned,
Whose warmth shall lull their dreaming lids,
While songs are crooned;
But they will not dream of us poor lads,
Left in the ground.²⁹

Owen’s unit was full of former coal miners and working men that often shared the stories about their profession and its poor working conditions. These recollections made

²⁸ Wilfred Owen, *The Poetry of Wilfred Owen*, ed. Edmund Blunden (London: Chatto & Windus, 1967), 104.

²⁹ Wilfred Owen, “Miners,” <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/miners/>.

him especially sympathetic towards their hard-earned life, enough to commemorate them in his poetry.

Furthermore, Wilfred Owen was a gentle soul whose Christian spirit is apparent not only from poetry but also from the actions of a young man who devoted his time in Dunsden to help the poor. In one of his letters home Owen said: “I am happier when I go to distribute dole to poor sick people, richer in His eyes, who ransomed us, and haler too than I.”³⁰

3.1.3.2 Death

The poem “Greater Love” (1918) is emotionally very strong and the theme of death is particularly distinctive. Owen used several similes which help the reader imagine the wounded soldier:

Red lips are not so red
As the stained stones kissed by the English dead.
...
O love, your eyes lose lure
When I behold eyes blinded in my stead!
...
Your dear voice is not dear,
Gentle, and evening clear,
As theirs whom none now hear,
Now earth has stopped their piteous mouths that coughed.³¹

“Greater Love” was written between November 1917 and January 1918 and it is a good example of Owen’s perception of the war. He is no longer the innocent boy who read Keats, Tennyson and adhered to romanticized Victorian view of “glorious” death. The battle of the Somme was the moment when the young poet finally grasped the meaning of destruction of the twentieth century warfare. In the letter to his mother Owen described one episode as following:

My dug-out held 25 men tight packed. Water filled it to a depth of 1 or 2 feet leaving say 4 feet of air. One entrance had been blown in and blocked. So far, other remained. The Germans knew we were staying there and decided we

³⁰ Owen, *The War Poems*, XX.

³¹ *Ibid*, 53.

shouldn't. Those fifty hours were the agony of my happy life. Every ten minutes on Sunday afternoon seemed an hour. I nearly broke down and let myself drown in the water that was now slowly rising over my knees. Toward 6 o'clock, when, I suppose, you would be going to church the shelling grew less intense and less accurate: so that I was mercifully helped to do my duty and crawl, wade, climb and flounder over No Man's Land to visit my other post. It took me half an hour to move about 150 yards. In the Platoon on my left the sentries over the dug-out were blown to nothing. One of these poor fellows was my first servant whom I rejected... If I had kept him he would have lived, for servants don't do Sentry Duty. I kept my own sentries half way down the stairs during the more terrific bombardment. In spite of this one lad was blown down and, I am afraid, blinded.³²

Douglas Kerr correctly points out that: "Owen was both the agent and the victim of the orders under which that suffering took place."³³ The consequences of life and death choices weigh heavy on the poet's consciousness, but in the end there is nothing he can do about it, being an officer of the crown.

3.1.3.3 Disillusionment and Insensibility

Even though Owen's soft-heartedness and empathy towards others is beyond question, we can identify traces of insensibility caused by disillusionment and perhaps by increasing influence of Siegfried Sassoon. "The Dead Beat" (1918) is written in facetious manner where "the autobiographical speaker"³⁴ does not realize that the suffering is happening before him. The commentary appears cruel, sarcastic even:

We sent him down at last, out of the way.
Unwounded; - stout lad, too, before that strafe.
Malingering? Stretcher-bearers winked, 'Not Half!'

Next day I heard the Doc's well-whiskied laugh:
'That scum you sent last night soon died. Hooray!'³⁵

³² Daniel Hipp, *The Poetry of Shell Shock* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2005), 47.

³³ Douglas Kerr, "Wilfred Owen and the Social Question." *English Literature in transition, 1880—1920* 34, no. 2 (1991): 190.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Owen, *The War Poems*, 31.

Within the poem “Insensibility” (1918) Owen identifies insensibility in “dullards whom no cannon stuns.”³⁶ These onlookers—politicians—that “by choice they made themselves immune / To pity and whatever moans in man”³⁷ deserve condemnation and it is against them that Owen directs his outrage. Soldiers are not to blame for being “happy” with losing their compassion and humanity because “Dullness best solves / The tease and doubt of shelling” and “makes their feet” less “Sore on the alleys cobbled with their brothers.”³⁸ Marie Isabel Gardett points out that “for a soldier, emotional numbness is necessary for survival, Owen implies, but in those who make the decisions, the same lack of emotion is ‘mean’.”³⁹

Owen’s poetry and its themes underwent a similar transition as his self-perception and identity. Being a poet and a soldier, he could see the world through the lenses of a participating individual and use his talent to convey the harsh reality of war not only through any poetry but the poetry that everyone, including veterans, could relate, reminisce and acknowledge. In his work we perceive a change in style and language as the traditional rhetoric was no longer adequate to address such extensive cruelty that gripped the whole world. Furthermore, Owen managed to eulogize the soldiers who suffered on the fields of Europe and, at the same time, remind the society to direct their outrage against the war at the men responsible for it. Even though we may find examples of Owen’s insensitive remarks towards suffering of his subordinates, his resolve never wavered mainly because of his comrades. A month before his death, he wrote to his mother that to fight alongside others and keeping them from harm was ever his primary concern, not pretentious patriotism. “My nerves are in perfect order... I came out in order to help these boys—directly by leading them as well as an officer can, indirectly by watching their suffering that I may speak of them as well as a pleader can. I have done the first.”⁴⁰

³⁶ Wilfred Owen, “Insensibility,” <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/resources/learning/core-poems/detail/57258>.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Marie Isabel Gardett, “Owen’s Insensibility,” *The Explicator* 61, no. 4 (2003): 226, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00144940309597821>.

⁴⁰ Jennifer Breen, *Wilfred Owen: Selected Poetry and Prose* (London: Routledge, 1988), 165.

3.2 Siegfried Sassoon

I would rather be killed than survive as one who had “wangled” his way through by saying that the War ought to stop. Better to be in the trenches with those whose experience I had shared and understood than with this medley of civilians.

—Siegfried Sassoon, *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston*

The man behind these words was born in 1886 into a wealthy Anglo-Jewish family and he grew up in pastoral background of South-West England—Kent. Both facts are very important for his early poetry which reflects his pre-war interests. Before the war, Sassoon enjoyed the leisure life of a country gentleman and as such he spend much time pursuing several passions — horse-riding, hunting, sports and writing poetry. Following the breakout of the First World War, Sassoon joined the British army but the circumstances prevented him from joining the fight in France outright despite his eagerness to go. However, a year later the moment came when young Sassoon departed England to become a part of the conflict that would forever change his life as it changed the way he composed the war poetry. Unlike Wilfred Owen or Isaac Rosenberg, who both died in combat, Sassoon survived the ordeal and lived a full long life even though it was a turbulent one. His post-war writing career shifted from poetry to journalism, editorship and prose. The time period spanning from the early life of a country gentleman, to being nicknamed “Mad Jack,” ending with a start of a new life as a civilian is documented in prose and remains preserved in his fictionalized novels and autobiographies that gained wide readership in both the USA and Britain—the relevant prose being: *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* (1928), *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930) and *Sherston’s Progress* (1936).

3.2.1 Early Poems

Sassoon’s verses were not always full of satirical criticism or realistic images from the Western Front. The poem “Absolution” (1915) reflects the author’s initial patriotic thinking that corresponded with the “romantic” view of national struggle where all soldiers are brave heroes who gladly laid down their lives in “the war [that] has made [them] wise” and moulded them into “the happy legion.”⁴¹ The last line of the last stanza is sentimental, resembling the naive mood of Rupert Brook’s sonnets, and shows

⁴¹ Sassoon, Siegfried, “Absolution,” in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1947), 11.

that even Sassoon, one of the most relentless critics of the war, was at first swayed by lofty notions of patriotism and glory: “What need we more, my comrades and my brothers?”⁴²

The poem “To Victory” (1916) stands on the edge of his poetic change. It creates a bridge between the man who believed the propaganda enough to eagerly join the Sussex Yeomanry in August 1914 and the man who risked his freedom and military career to warn the society about the futility of war. By the time of its creation, Sassoon had already been on the front long enough to appreciate the freedom and tranquillity that only peace can offer. He wishes to see nature again in “colours that were [his] joy”:

I want to fill my gaze with blue and silver,
Radiance through living roses, spires of green
Rising in young-limbed copse and lovely wood⁴³

Despite being demoralized by murky surroundings and dim shades of “greys and browns,” the speaker still believes in better tomorrows “when [his] sight shall be clear and [his] heart rejoice.”⁴⁴

Early lyrical poems depict the powers of nature as restorative, a tonic for the soul. At first, to hear the “blithe wind laugh,” or to feel the rain on your face is considered uplifting.⁴⁵ On the other hand, we know such sentiments could not have prevailed after the hard-earned experience of cold nights where the wind chilled Sassoon to the bone and nature’s gift of rain proved disadvantageous if not deadly for struggling individuals next to him in a cold trench flooded with “sludge [...] ankle-deep.”⁴⁶

3.2.2 Themes

3.2.2.1 Death

“The Rear-Guard” (1917) is a great example of a poem whose detailed account of a journey underground makes the reader understand the circumstances in which soldiers had to linger. It depicts a scene from tunnels which evokes a feeling of a path through hell. Everything is broken or scattered around: “Tins, boxes, bottles [...] / A mirror

⁴² Sassoon, “Absolution,” 11.

⁴³ Sassoon, Siegfried, “To Victory,” in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1947), 13.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 14.

⁴⁶ Sassoon, Siegfried, “A Working Party,” in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1947), 19.

smashed.”⁴⁷ There is no light to guide you through except for a “torch with patching glare.”⁴⁸ One chokes on the “unwholesome air”⁴⁹ that stinks of rotting flesh and death. The author intends to shock the reader with horrifying images of the war which are typical for trench warfare. Dead, stiff comrades with “fists of fingers clutch[ing] a blackening wound.”⁵⁰ At the end of the poem, Sassoon’s choice of words degrades the soldiers. They are no more than “muttering creatures underground” driven half-mad by “boom of shells” exploding above their heads.⁵¹

Patrick Quinn concludes that it is a hideous experience transformed “into a poem destined to shock the complacent Englishman into an awareness of the actual conditions of war.”⁵² It gives the reader a sense of reality. The French battlefield was a hostile, very unwelcoming place and Sassoon created this poem to make the readers at home realize the inhumane conditions in which the soldiers had to spend years of their existence. Like them, the torch bearer moved the only way—forward, one step at a time trying not to give in and hope to see the daybreak of another day.

3.2.2.2 Compassion

The reappearing theme of strong solidarity with fellow soldiers permeates Sassoon’s poetry. Many a poem written after the end of the Great War prove that Sassoon remains emotionally stuck in his soldier years, unable to let go of the officer’s responsibility and guilt.

In “Aftermath” (1919) the narrator still reminisces about the lives lost, “the stretcher-cases lurching back / With dying eyes and lolling heads” and he wishes to alter the course of history to be able to save more of “the lads who once were keen and kind and gay.”⁵³ The final line starts with a promise to never forget “the slain of the War” and carry with him their memory.⁵⁴ Camaraderie is a common theme in the war poetry. However, Sassoon made it his duty to remind the society that the peace they live in was bought with the sacrifice of millions and should not be taken for granted despite the

⁴⁷ Sassoon, Siegfried, “The Rear-Guard,” in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1947), 69.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Patrick Quinn, “Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon: From Early Poetry to Autobiography” (PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 1988), 237, <http://go.warwick.ac.uk/wrap/34812>.

⁵³ Sassoon, Siegfried, “Aftermath,” in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1947), 119.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

fact, as Meg Crane points out, that “revisiting old experiences and trying to rearrange the outcome does Sassoon a disservice.”⁵⁵

“Banishment” (1918) is another poem where the narrator, being also the commanding officer, displays a clear admiration for all soldiers who “shoulder to aching shoulder, side by side” suffer alongside him in the trenches.⁵⁶ Sassoon wants his men to know that despite the government’s effort to label him a conscientious objector or a deserter, everything he does he does so out of love and with one purpose—to save them from the “grappling guns”:

The darkness tells how vainly I have striven
To free them from the pit where they must dwell

...

Love drove me to rebel.
Love drives me back to grope with them through hell;
And in their tortured eyes I stand forgiven.⁵⁷

Given the author’s history and fighting spirit—being the owner of the Military Cross and the nickname “Mad Jack”—the sentiments expressed are genuine without the doubt of being regarded as simply nostalgic or disingenuous.

3.2.2.3 Disillusionment

Do everything you ask of those you command.

—George S. Patton

Sassoon believed that officers should lead men by example and always make decisions on their behalf. Before being sent back to the front line, he spent some time in Rouen with other high ranking officers who, in his eyes, did not care a bit about common soldiers but rather spent their time eating and drinking themselves to an early grave. In his diary Sassoon writes an entry about one such general:

⁵⁵ Meg Crane, “Siegfried Sassoon,” in *“British” World War One Poetry: An Introduction*, September 23, 2014, online audio lecture, 51:03, University of Oxford Podcasts, <https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/siegfried-sassoon>.

⁵⁶ Sassoon, Siegfried, “Banishment,” in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1947), 86.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

“You have never been within thirty miles of a front line trench, and yet you call yourself a general. And you will be alive, over-eating yourself in a military club, when I am dead in a shell-hole up on the Somme.”⁵⁸

“Blighters” (1918) is one of Sassoon’s most unforgiving poems manifesting the utter contempt for human ignorance. He targets both indifferent politicians and complacent citizens who “tier beyond tier [...] grin / And cackle at the Show.”⁵⁹ Instead of using humorous satire to stress the moral shortcomings of society he demonstrates his sorrow with rage and reproach. It is obvious from the usage of mocking vocabulary and the author’s wish to “see a Tank come down the stalls, / Lurching to rag-time tunes, or ‘Home, sweet Home.’”⁶⁰ This is not only a disapproval of a veteran that sees no possible reconciliation between the society and himself because of how different their war experience is. Sassoon feels a widening gap that can be filled only with true knowledge of the war’s character. In “Blighters” the author wants to shock people into understanding that however bad their situation at home is, soldiers in France have it much worse and should not be ridiculed on stage.

Hundreds of thousands underage recruits lied about their age or gave false names in order to pass medical examinations for enlisting. They answered the government’s patriotic call to take up arms and fight for the king and country. This was their part. Sassoon did not consider his duty to lead these men to victory on the battlefield but to help them stay alive and see the end of the war. Hard-earned experience, loss and difficulties of personal life made his poetry all the more accurate with clear purpose. Firstly, to wake up the society to the atrocities of war that the government refused to acknowledge. Secondly, to expose the futility of war that should have been over by then. Lastly, to confront the people responsible for the war who prolonged the conflict and profited from it.

⁵⁸ Sassoon, Siegfried, *Diaries 1915-1918*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), 139—40., quoted in Patrick Quinn, “Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon: From Early Poetry to Autobiography” (PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 1988), 234.

⁵⁹ Sassoon, Siegfried, “Blighters,” in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1947), 21.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

3.3 Edward Thomas

Philip Edward Thomas was born 3 March 1878 in Lambeth. Although being generally considered a war poet, he significantly differs from his contemporaries. Instead of poignant scenes of courage and sacrifice on the front or a memorial tribute to fallen comrades, Thomas created equally moving observations concerning life outside the military career. There are no verses reflecting battle experience nor did he focus on the horrors of trenches. His war poetry completes the image of the Great War by tackling the consequences the Great War had on the other side of the English Channel—the country and the people living in it.

3.3.1 Themes

3.3.1.1 Countryside

Thomas lived in many places during his short life. However, there is a village of significance in Southern England that, for a time, became the target of his daily walks, where he drew on the graceful nature for inspiration. During this time, Robert Frost moved to Steep with his family and often joined Thomas for long walks. They became very close friends and Frost significantly influenced Thomas, convincing him to focus on poetry, a genre that Thomas considered to be the highest peak of literature even if he had not composed any himself before. Despite the general acclaim for his writing skills, Thomas published the first collection of poems under the pseudonym Edward Eastaway. His pastoral poetry is lyrical and meditative, often written from the point of view of a narrator wandering the countryside with a heightened attentiveness to nature. Gerald Roberts describes Thomas as: “an acute and realistic observer of wild-life, trees, plants, country sights and smells, the weather and the seasons, and to a lesser extent country folk and their ways, he builds a picture of rural southern England which explains the patriotism that led him to fight in France.”⁶¹ However, the war creeps in and changes the landscape and its people. Thomas noticed the change and his “war” poetry reflects this alteration.

“As the Team’s Head-Brass” (1916) is one of the poems that show the negative effect of the war on the countryside most acutely. The poem, written in Iambic pentameter, is pleasantly slow-paced and rhythmical, as the ploughman works on the

⁶¹ Gerald Roberts, *Selected Poems of Edward Thomas* (London: Macmillan Education, 1988), 61.

field and repeatedly approaches the narrator to talk with him, then again turns away and returns to the plough:

Every time the horses turned
Instead of treading me down, the ploughman leaned
Upon the handles to say or ask a word,
About the weather, next about the war.
Scraping the share he faced towards the wood,
And screwed along the furrow till the brass flashed
Once more.

The blizzard felled the elm whose crest
I sat in, by a woodpecker's round hole,
The ploughman said. 'When will they take it away?'
'When the war's over.' So the talk began –
One minute and an interval of ten,
A minute more and the same interval.⁶²

As a result of war, there are not enough people to work in the fields. The ploughman is unable to move the fallen tree alone and neither is he able to call for help because his friend is dead. Together with the narrator, they contemplate on what might have been if the war had not started:

Have many gone
From here?' 'Yes.' 'Many lost?' 'Yes, a good few.
Only two teams work on the farm this year.
One of my mates is dead. The second day
In France they killed him. It was back in March,
The very night of the blizzard, too. Now if
He had stayed here we should have moved the tree.'
'And I should not have sat here. Everything
Would have been different. For it would have been
Another world.'⁶³

⁶² Edward Thomas, "As the Team's Head-Brass," in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936), 33.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 33–34.

The two lovers in the poem play an important role too as their appearance and disappearance mark the beginning and the end of the conversation between the stranger and the ploughman. They are a symbol of hope and the promise of a new life. The two lines, “The lovers disappeared into the wood” and “The lovers came out of the wood again,”⁶⁴ show that although the war is a terrible thing reaching far beyond the field of battle, there is always love and the possibility for a positive outcome.

The character of a ploughman also appears in Thomas’ poem “A Private” (1916). For Thomas, the ploughman represents the people of rural England; he is inextricably connected to the image of the countryside that Thomas loved so much. Although the title of the poem is anonymous, the ploughman is a concrete person: “This ploughman dead in battle” who “slept out of doors / Many’s a frozen night.”⁶⁵ People ask him where he slept, but his reply does not reveal much. “And where now at last he sleeps / More sound in France—that, too, he secret keeps.”⁶⁶ The last two lines of the poem use the rhyme “sleeps—keeps”, the long vowel evokes the mood of tranquillity and reflects the calmness of sleep and death. It is important to note that in majority of his poetry, Thomas does not appear judgmental about the war; there are no invectives that result in a disapproving statement. This is obvious in “A Private,” where, in the words of Bernard Bergonzi, “the stress is on the continuity of natural processes rather than in making any assertion about the facts of war.”⁶⁷ The war becomes part of everyday reality which Thomas observes rather than condemns.

3.3.1.2 Death

Another important and well-known poem is “Rain” (1916). According to Gerald Roberts, “Rain and its association with death is a theme that had a special significance for Thomas.”⁶⁸ The word “rain/rains” occurs in the poem eight times and together with the structure of the poem recreate the atmosphere of the solitary “bleak hut” pounded by raindrops at night.⁶⁹ This setting helps Thomas to realize the inevitability of death. “Remembering again that I shall die” is what we all must do.⁷⁰ Thomas contemplates

⁶⁴ Thomas, “As the Team’s Head-Brass,” 33—34.

⁶⁵ Edward Thomas, “A Private,” in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936), 202.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Bernard Bergonzi, *Heroes’ Twilight: A Study of the Literature of the Great War* (London: Macmillan Press, 1980), 86.

⁶⁸ Roberts, *Selected Poems*, 46.

⁶⁹ Edward Thomas, “Rain,” in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936), 94.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

the idea that death might be welcome, “perfect, and / Cannot, the tempest tells me, disappoint.”⁷¹ Nevertheless, it is not something he would wish for others:

Blessed are the dead that the rain rains upon:
But here I pray that none whom once I loved
Is dying tonight or lying still awake
Solitary, listening to the rain,
Either in pain or thus in sympathy
Helpless among the living and the dead⁷²

The poem shows the author’s emotional instability as well as innate indecisiveness and reluctance for picking a side. On one hand, death seems to be a promising solution to solitude, depression—all the pain and struggle for existence is left behind. On the other hand, it is the ultimate journey, the biggest mystery forever unsolved and such uncertainty does not leave him entirely at peace because what if after death comes only nothingness without even the sound of rain to soothe his troubled mind.

Other symbols for death are sleep and a forest. Sleep—death association appears in the poem “A Private” mentioned above, and also in the poem “Lights Out” (1916):

I have come to the borders of sleep,
The unfathomable deep
Forest where all must lose
Their way, however straight,
Or winding, soon or late;
They cannot choose.⁷³

The author ponders on the metaphorical sleep of death. It is an uncharted territory, an unknown forest where “love ends, / Despair, ambition ends; / All pleasure and all trouble.”⁷⁴ Death seems appealing because it offers “sleep that is sweeter / Than tasks most noble,”⁷⁵ even though he cannot help but feel naturally afraid of this lonely

⁷¹ Thomas, “Rain,” 94.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Edward Thomas, “Lights Out,” in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936), 102.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

enterprise. Thomas understands that should the timeless void, be it sleep or death, call, there is no choice in the matter but to “enter.”⁷⁶

3.3.1.3 War

“This is No Case of Petty Right or Wrong” (1915) is special because the author approaches the topic directly to express his feelings rather than to remain impartial and silently observe. The poem consists of a single stanza which intensifies the angry and argumentative mood of the poem. It is a speech about Thomas’ mental processes concerning reasons for enlisting as well as his personal stance towards newspaper propaganda. In the beginning, Thomas’ statement: “I hate not Germans, nor grow hot / With love of Englishmen, to please newspapers”⁷⁷ shows that a person has to be motivated by something greater than political bias and journalistic suppositions.

Thomas does not care for inflated tales of German villainy nor does he intend to hate a nation based on newspaper propaganda. Bergonzi explained that “his commitment is to an idea of England and English traditions.”⁷⁸ Kaiser is the enemy and has to be dealt with for the preservation of England. The last lines of the poem show the speaker’s commitment to the motherland which is personified as a woman:

She is all we know and live by, and we trust
She is good and must endure, loving her so:
And as we love ourselves we hate our foe.⁷⁹

In addition, the author expresses hope for the continuation of England not as a nation but as the land even though the choice is not an easy one. That is because Thomas does not see the war for a conflict between justice and injustice:

Dinned

With war and argument I read no more
Than in the storm smoking along the wind
Athwart the wood. Two witches’ cauldrons roar.
From one the weather shall rise clear and gay;

⁷⁶ Thomas, “Lights Out,” 102.

⁷⁷ Edward Thomas, “This is No Case of Petty Right or Wrong,” in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936), 184.

⁷⁸ Bergonzi, *Heroes’ Twilight*, 86.

⁷⁹ Thomas, “This is No Case of Petty Right or Wrong,” 184.

Out of the other an England beautiful
And like her mother that died yesterday.⁸⁰

There are other contrasting images that correspond with the idea that not everything is just black or white. You have to remain objective to divine the real point. Lines 21 and 22 are crucial. Thomas finally concludes that England is the land of liberty and it has to retain its freedom at all costs.

Edward Thomas was one of the soldier-poets who did not survive the Great War. Although his career as a poet was very short, the remaining verses help us to see the war from a different perspective that completes the necessary context to understand the Great War and its aftermath. The poetry is full of hope and appreciation for every variety of nature's beauty. Thomas's use of diction as well as rhythm makes his poetry atmospheric and easy to visualize. Furthermore, the themes discussed are deeply entwined with author's existential dilemmas stemming from his personalized view of the world and thus are unique.

⁸⁰ Thomas, "This is No Case of Petty Right or Wrong," 184.

4 CONCLUSION

My bachelor thesis focuses on English poetry of the Great War which represents a vital part of the twentieth century cultural heritage. The purpose of my thesis was to create a complex picture of war experience by drawing on historical data as well as individual accounts of soldiers, women and civilians. However, the most important source of insight are the analysed poets: Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and Edward Thomas, whose poetry with relevant themes remain the main focus of this thesis.

The opening chapter reviews the conflict from a historical perspective. It provides general facts about the conflict and additional information on crucial events from the Western and Eastern front explaining why the development in the West was much slower than in the East. The industrial revolution was a double edged blade enabling the technological progress that people turned to their advantage and, on the other hand, against each other. The ensuing war changed the society forcing humanity to adapt which resulted in a certain change of perspective for the whole generation as everyone was compelled to survive this time of universal chaos. Furthermore, it was not only soldiers that suffered but also civilians and animals. The last part of the first chapter analyses the state of English war poetry written before the breakout of the First World War. Several poems from the early days of the war are discussed in order to show that mawkish rhetoric of patriotism and glory, out-dated ideals and romantic themes failed to address the approaching calamity properly.

The Great War poetry created a bridge that helped to connect two different worlds—civilians without any combat experience and battle-scarred veterans with troubled minds. Both Owen and Sassoon wrote uncompromising poetry with unique insight to what it meant to be a poet, a soldier, an officer, and a casualty of war. There are three prominent themes that permeate the poetry. The first theme is compassion. Sassoon dedicated much of his poetry to fallen comrades that would not see the better tomorrows they fought for. Owen's thoughts were more with all people regardless of status or occupation. The second theme is death that claimed millions of lives because of human greed and intolerance. Both of them used death as a tool to shock the readers into action using vivid imagery from stern reality and descriptive language. The last one is disillusionment. Sassoon and Owen tried to warn the unsuspecting society about the incompetence and treachery of the government that should have been making decision on their behalf as well as a disregard of high ranking officers towards the lives of their

subordinates. Each of these themes is deeply connected with both writers because they grounded their work on personal war experience and, even more so, as both of them were officers who cared for the men under their command.

Despite the lack of proper military experience, Edward Thomas was a prolific writer who brought a whole new insight into the subject of the Great War. The first theme discussed is the corrupting effect the war had on his beloved countryside and its people. This negative impact is most perceptible in the first of the selected poems, "As the Team's Head-Brass." The following subchapter deals with the theme of death. This particular topic was most alluring for Thomas as he often pondered his own demise while being depressed. The last poem, "This is No Case of Petty Right or Wrong," shows Thomas to be a level-headed patriot that will fight the Germans not because of propaganda but for his love for England.

At the beginning of the Great War, many a young poet composed verses that reflected their enthusiasm for fighting and willingness to die for the motherland. They viewed the war as an opportunity for men to prove their courage. However, these poets were mostly inexperienced recruits who were yet to set foot in the no man's land. Thus, the Great War poetry oscillates between the initial naivety of these uninitiated poets and their inevitable disillusionment that came with combat experience and loss. Authors like Owen, Sassoon or Thomas wrote their war poetry with great finesse providing critical insight about the life on the front and outside of it.

RESUMÉ

Tématem této bakalářské práce je první světová válka a zrod nové generace básníků, která svým přístupem k životu a poezii vytvořila nový žánr – válečnou poezii vystihující nekompromisní situaci na válečné ale i domácí frontě. První část práce se zabývá historickým kontextem první světové války. Druhá část práce analyzuje díla vybraných básníků, Wilfreda Owena, Siegfrieda Sassoona a Edwarda Thomase.

V první podkapitole jsem představil zásadní události, které vedly k první světové válce, a charakterizoval vývoj západního a východního frontu. V další podkapitole jsem popsal vliv průmyslové revoluce na britskou společnost. Třetí podkapitola se zabývala oběťmi války, k nimž patří nejen vojáci, ale i civilisté a zvířata. Ve čtvrté podkapitole jsem předložil ucelený přehled britské společnosti a změn, ke kterým došlo kvůli válečnému konfliktu. Těmito změnami jsou zejména měnící se postoje lidí k válce, ať už vojáků bojujících v zákopech Francie či civilistů, a také role žen v britské společnosti. V poslední podkapitole první části jsem analyzoval britskou válečnou poezii psanou koncem devatenáctého a počátkem dvacátého století. Tento přehled slouží jako základ pro následující kapitolu, která se zabývá básníky první světové války.

V druhé části této práce jsem představil tři autory, Wilfreda Owena, Siegfrieda Sassoona a Edwarda Thomase, a jejich válečnou poezii. Každému z těchto básníků je věnována jedna podkapitola, která je uvedena relevantními informacemi z autorova života. Tento kontext je dotvářen pomocí úryvků z relevantní prózy, např. biografie či osobních diářů. Následují rozborů básní, hlavní důraz je kladen na poezii se zaměřením na témata, která jsou společná pro vybrané autory, ale i na témata specifická pro konkrétního autora, jenž přináší neobvyklý vhled na události spojené s první světovou válkou. Wilfred Owen je prototypickým básníkem první světové války. Jeho poezie reflektuje změnu Owenova pohledu na válečný konflikt: zprvu naivní oceňování cti a statečnosti padlých vojáků rychle střídá vystřízlivění pramenící z vlastní zkušenosti v zákopech. Další témata objevující se v jeho poezii jsou soucit a soudržnost, smrt a deziluze. Stejná témata se objevují i v poezii Siegfrieda Sassoona, který jako jeden z mála básníků válku přežil a nadále pokračoval v psaní poezie a prózy. Jeho básně slouží jako varování nejen před válkou, ale i před nekompetentními veliteli, kteří pohrdají životy svých podřízených. Soucit se v jeho poezii objevuje především v básních věnovaných padlým spolubojovníkům. Edward Thomas byl velmi plodný básník, který většinu svých veršů napsal před narukováním. I přesto jeho poezie

poskytuje jedinečný úhel pohledu na válečný konflikt, a to dopad první světové války na anglický venkov, přírodu i lid. Thomas často trpěl depresivními náladami a přemýšlel o vlastní smrti. Válka tyto myšlenky ještě více umocnila a téma smrti se v jeho poezii často promítá.

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ANOTACE

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Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá první světovou válkou a jejím odrazem v poezii anglických básníků této doby. Důležitou součástí práce je historický kontext první světové války, její události a vliv na britskou společnost. Hlavním cílem práce je najít společná témata, která jsou typická pro válečnou poezii a objevují se ve verších vybraných básníků, i témata specifická pro jednotlivé vybrané básníky.

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This bachelor thesis deals with the First World War and its reflection in the verses of English poets of that time. Integral part of the thesis is the historical context of the First World War, its events and its impact on British society. The main goal is to find themes that epitomize war poetry and appear in selected poets' verses and themes specific to each poet.